

How to Train Your Soul

by Poisoned Scarlet

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Summary: Dragon AU. She's come to trust her dragon above all else. He was keeper of her secrets, her sorrows, her happiness. But it would be a lie if she said she had been prepared for the height of her twenty first winter, or the events that ultimately made them a legend among legends.

## 1. Chapter 1

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>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett\_

"Clayâ€|" Maka held a hand out, quelling her growing irritation at the mischievous dragon. His long arms curved inward and the dragon fell into a pounce at the sound of his name, his tail swaying back and forth. Maka could see the dangerous set of poisonous spikes with every swing, but she tried to keep her eyes steady on Clay's diluted gray ones. "No. Stop. Don't do it, Clay, I know what you're going to do and it's not a good idea!"

Clay snorted, a heavy exhale of breath that made the dust beneath him rise. He backed up a few steps, the dimming sunlight reflecting off mud green scales. He was a particularly large dragon for his age, with a long snout and wide-set eyes. His neck reached higher than others and he was built strongly but narrowly. He was more for ground-attacks than aerial. However, he was also particularly \_troublesome\_ with his horrid sense of humor and penchant for playing pranks on her. Keeper Stein had assured her he was an outstanding dragon in and of itself, strong enough for combat and healthy to boot, but he had failed to inform her that the dragon's terrible sense of humor could get her killed one day.

"Clayâ€|"

Clay wiggled his rump, his short but sharp, jagged teeth curving into a full-out grin.

"Noâ€œ\_NOO!\_" Maka screamed when he lunged at her, the ground shaking with his every step. She managed to dodge his tail, the ball of spikes at the end hitting the ground hard enough to crack it. Clay released a snort that resembled a laugh and chased after her, following her back to the training grounds. His tiny and narrow wings flapped cheerily on his back, his gray eyes alight with glee, and he seemed completely ignorant of Maka's panic and horror.

Clay had the intelligence of a peacock.

Maka was sure of this.

"STEIN!" Maka screeched. "STEIN! HE'S GOING TO KILL ME!"

"Nonsense!" Keeper Franken Stein dismissed, squinting down at her from the watch tower. He had a rolled up parchment in his hand, his heavy winter coat open to reveal a stitched up black turtle neck. He wore dark leather straps that crisscrossed down his chest, revealing an assortment of daggers at his sides. His pants were wool, black, and they were tucked into his furred boots for added warmth. "He's playing!"

"THIS IS NOT PLAYING!" Maka screamed. "THIS IS \_MURDER!\_"

"Consider this part of your training!" Stein shouted, watching her dodge around the playful dragon. "You will need to train your dragon to conform with your will! Consider this your first exam!"

"CONSIDER THIS," Maka snarled out, dodging another pounce. "FAILED!" His pudgy hands tried to grab her and Clay bounced up and down happily when she dodged. She could see there was no ill-intent in his actions but that did not mean that she didn't feel the seep of fear in her bones. Dragons were dangerous creatures and nothing was more dangerous than a dragon who tried to roughhouse with their Trainer as if they were another of their kind. She had no authority over this dragon; he viewed her as an equal and that simply could not be. She was his Trainer, not his companion. For this to work, there needed to be some sort of hierarchy and there obviously was none as Clay's hand whacked into her shoulder and she was blown back by the force.

Maka was grateful she had decided to wear her shoulder plating today.

"\_STEIN!\_"

"Oh, alright," Stein mumbled. He made a waving motion and Maka saw a streak of gold from the corner of her eye. It was not long before something crashed into Clay just when the dragon was moments away from taking another swing at Maka. Maka crawled back a few steps, holding a hand to her chest to calm her racing heart while Stein's dragon wrestled the other one into submission. As they exchanged roars and bites, Clay's heavy tail swinging at the gold-scaled dragon with the enormous set of claws, Maka stumbled upright and made her way undetected to the watch tower, running up the stairs with hell to say.

"I don't want him!" Maka hissed, storming right up to Stein. Before the Keeper could say anymore, she shouted: "Stein, he's disobedient and he misbehaves and no matter how much I try to make him submissive to me, he does not listen! He's an idiot and he thinks everything is a gameâ€"that's not the type of dragon I want!"

"He's very young. That explains his playful behavior however I would not reject him so brashly. He's a highly intelligent being, he just has the mindset of a child just like any other at his age. One of the advantages to bonding with a young dragon is their fierce loyalty to you in the future," Stein calmly rationalized. "It's also easier to train them at a youngâ€"!"

"I don't have the patienceâ€"nor timeâ€"to deal with a rambunctious, toddler dragon, Stein!" Maka sighed. "I barely have the tolerance to deal with my father, I do not need another child to look after!"

"You would make quite a wife," Stein deadpanned and Maka growled warningly, her gloved hands clenching into fists. "Well, we don't receive another batch of dragons until the next half-moon, so you will have to wait if you decide to take on another dragon. Will you?"

Maka only had to look at Clay, the goof rolling on his back and flailing his long arms excitedly, to say, "Yes."

Stein heaved a sigh but understood. "You're eighteen, Maka. You were supposed to bond with a dragon months ago. You know you can't attend formal combat classes without one."

"I know," Maka dropped her eyes, looking back at the two dragons roughhousing on the forest floor. She tightened her furry coat over herself, the wind chill beginning to get to her. "But these last three, it doesn't matter if I could have tamed them. I just don't feelâ€|a connection with them, like the others do. Meme never gave me any trouble, she was very obedient from the start, but there was still something lacking. There's always something lacking and I don't know what it is or how to remedy it."

Stein smiled and turned back to the training grounds, understanding her confusion more than she thought he did. "Your father requested for your presence an hour ago."

Maka cringed. "â€|What did you tell him?"

"That you were training, which you certainly were, and that you would return late."

Maka beamed up at the Keeper. "Thank you, Stein!"

"You are very welcome. Although, going to see him might be of your interest," Stein looked at her when she asked how and his face became grim. "There has been sightings of an Asura down by the cliff-sides. Recently, there have also been rumors that the travesties that have plagued the eastern villages are due to that dragon, and it's of major concern if it's circling close to ours. Although we may be able to stave off its attacks, we can't for long. Asuras are infamous for hoarding not material objects but live beings such as other dragons. If this Asura is dominating neighboring villages with its hoard, then

we'll have a battle on our hands and many people will be caught in the crossfire."

Maka clenched her fists, looking back at Clay again. There was the temptation of retracting her statement and training Clay anyway, if only to be prepared for the threat that loomed over them. But she also knew that forcing herself to use Clay could result in additional devastation. There was no need to cause anymore trouble than there already was.

"How long ago was this?"

"Five nights ago."

"And we were informed of this now?"

"According to your father, yes," Stein adjusted his rounded spectacles on the bridge of his nose. "He wants you to stay within the village perimeter until we're sure it's gone."

"No."

"Maka," Stein rose his voice, casting her a sharp look. She might not be his daughter, but he certainly had more authority over her than her own father did. It also didn't help that she sought him out when it came to these sorts of fatherly things. "It's dangerous and you do not even have a dragon to aid you should things go wrong. I know you and I know you will go investigate to see if it's true and I advise you, for once, to think things through. If you go," he cautioned, "and it sees or even hears you, it will attack you. Asuras do not hoard humans, nor do the majority of the draconian specie, you know this. You will have no chance to escape if you're attacked."

Maka pressed her lips together, knowing this too well. Stein was Keeper of the Dragons in their tiny village but he was also very knowledgeable of the creatures, given that he had well-documented a plethora of species in a tome kept in the hands of her father. He had also taught her class all about the strange habits of dragons and one of them involved the particular phenomena of hoarding. There were particular dragons, such as the Kishin specie or the even rarer Soul Eaters, whom hoarded humans instead of material possessions such as jewels or gold and kept them locked up in their caves to starve. Although it was not the dragons intention to allow the human to die, it often happened, and it sometimes explained the continual disappearance of people as the dragons tended to replace them as they died.

"I won't go look for it so recklessly, I know better than that," Maka mumbled, adding sourly: "I'm not twelve, Stein. I'm eighteen."

"I know," Stein calmly said. "Being eighteen is different from acting eighteen, however."

"What was that?!"

"Nothing. It's a nice day out, isn't it?" he airily said.

Maka growled and shot him a dark look he ignored. He turned back to his dragon and waved his hand twice. Maka watched as the

golden-scaled dragon perked up attentively and abandoned Clay altogether, jumping into the air with a spread of shimmering wings and returning back to where she had been previously. Maka couldn't exactly lie and say she wasn't the least bit envious of his facility with the dragon, of how easily she bent to his will and how absolutely fascinating it was to watch Meister and dragon act as one, both off the battle field as on it.

"I'm going home," she stated.

"Your father?"

"By this time, he's probably home and if he's not, I don't want to know where he is," Maka soured a little more, her eyes going down to her knee-high boots. They were furred to shield from the cold snow with twin white straps that wrapped around her calves tightly. Her dark maroon skirt was pleated and knee-length, kept up by a belt of olden leather with a large silver buckle in the middle. The pants she wore underneath did little to stave off the cold, but she made do with what she had. Her shirt was laced in the front with string, sundried brown leather that protected her from blows to her chest. She hadn't worn her chest-plate today; she hardly wore any heavy armor when she came to training. The most she wore were her gloves and the special black wrapping around her wrists that Black Star, her childhood friend, had given her when her combat training began many years ago. Aside from that, this was the very same outfit her mother donned when she was sent out to hunt for skin and meat, when the times had still been kind to her. Now she resided in a secluded village far, far away from her ownâ€"with a new family and a new husband that was not a cheating scoundrel like her father.

But she understood her mother was not as innocent as she liked to make herself out to be. Two months away from the old and in came the new. These things in love never lasted, that had been bitterly taught to Maka from a tender age. This was why she wanted to become a Trainerâ€"a Meister, like her mother had been once, but better than her. To get away from those obligations, the apparent misery of marriage and children, and most especially loathsome men like her father. Instead of marrying first, bearing children, and then becoming a Meister, like her mother had done, Maka planned on pursuing this career until death stole her soul away. No mortal man was going to steal her away like her father had to her mother, no, Maka had a plan and Maka Albarn always kept to her plans.

Which was why, as she looked to where the sun was setting, she needed to compose a very good plan for what was to come next. Asuras had a horrid sense of smell but their hearing was otherworldly. It was a good thing Maka had always been very light on her feetâ€!

"Dinner is at six, Marie is punctual about these things," Stein absently told her and then added, "No, not you Marie. The other Marie."

Maka squeaked when she heard the disheartened snort of Stein's dragon, ironically named Marie by the Keeper. Maka backed up a few steps as the dragon hovered nearby, sending her Meister a dark look.

"Why you would name her the same as your wife," Maka began slowly, "I will never understand."

"She reminds me of her," a faint smile flit his face before it was gone. "Will you be coming? Marie needs to know how many bowls to put out. No, not you, you don't have opposable thumbs," he gave his dragon a look she whined at.

"I'll drop by! I promise!" Maka gave a little wave and a half-smile at them both, already a few steps down the stone stairs. "Tell Marie I might be late!" She shouted over her shoulder as she ran. The dragon perked up at her name and only soured when Maka cast her an apologetic look. "Iâ€"have some stuff to do!"

"Trouble more like it," Stein muttered and turned back to Clay, who was now chasing his tail. He cocked his head at the dragon when it crashed into the floor, moaning in pain. He attacked his tail right after, rolling around as he played with the ball of spikes at the end. He pricked himself and released a cry, placated now that he was hurt. Stein rubbed his chin. "Hm, he might be a little special after all...what do you think, Marie?"

The dragon merely snorted.

\* \* \*

><p>This was it.</p>

He was going to do it; he was going to tell his daughter no and mean it.

It was far too dangerous, far too risky, to do otherwise so Spirit steeled himself right before he stepped inside his home.

"Darling?" Spirit tentatively called out, peering in. He checked both ways before stepping inside completely, making his way around their wooden dining room table to the small little cot that was his daughters bed. The fireplace was lit; he knew Maka was home if it was, she would never light it and leave it on if she was not present. "Where are you? I need to speak to you about something urgent!"

"I'm up here," Maka said and Spirit looked up to find her slouched back on one of the slanted wooden pillars that held their home up. She was playing with a pocket knife, carving something out of wood. Swirls of wood shavings collected in a tiny mountain on the hard-wood floor. "What do you want?"

Spirit heaved a sigh. "I want to talk."

"We're talking."

"Face to face."

"I am facing you."

"Maka, you know this is not what I mean," Spirit frowned but she only continued her carving. He didn't push her, though, he was reluctant to push herâ€"not since the separation, at least. It had been years since but Maka had never quite gotten over how her mother had caught him in cahoots with one of the barmaids in their village and then subsequently left. She had only been eleven at the time, just registered for her first classes of combat training. It also didn't

help how quickly her mother had settled down with another man a few towns away. Things were not always as black and white as they seemed but they had both been having trouble with their marriage and Maka had been unfortunately stuck in between. "I want to tell you aboutâ€!" "

"The Asura spotting? I know. Stein told me."

Spirit blinked. "Oh. Ahem, well. Then you should already know that no one is allowed outside the village at all times."

"Do you know where it is?" Maka asked instead.

"No, we don't. Not yet!"

"But do you know where it was last spotted?"

"Well, yes."

Maka perked up. "Can you give me an approximation?"

Spirit thought about it. "Due west, a few points past Gallows Way. It's by the cliff-sides. Old Tezca caught sighting of it when he was picking up some herbs. He barely made it out with his life! That's why I don't want you toâ€!"

Maka stopped carving as she was drawn back into her thoughts, ignoring her father. She knew exactly where that was, having been there a few times with Marie to pick up some herbs, and it was quite some ways away from her village. If she left at dawn with the excuse of training, she could make it there in an hours time and scout for any sort of clue that would help them gain an advantage against this new threat. Maka knew it was unlikely for the dragon to linger in such open spaceâ€"they liked caves or small, cramped spaces where they could curl upâ€"so at that time of morning she should have no problem traversing that part of the land without any risk of danger. If she could pick up some clues that might hint that this Asura had a hoard and, perhaps judge the number by the tracks left behind, she could tell Stein and they could come up with a battle strategy orâ€"

"Do I make myself clear, Maka?"

"Yes," Maka smirked, sitting upright.

That was the plan! She was going to go investigate! But she would be careful: she knew Stein was right about the dangers, but she was eighteen and had a pretty good handle on basic combat and strategy. She was one of the best. After all, she strove to be the best and it helped that she had a talent for it.

"Oh. Um," Spirit fumbled. He hadn't expected her to agree so easily; she was a spitfire just like her mother. "Well, good! That's my girl!"

"I'm going to train Clay tomorrow, early morning," Maka lied, looking down at her father. She slunk into a crouch and jumped down, landing with a dull thud. "So I'll be leaving early tomorrow!"

"Maka, you know you can't go past the perimeter," Spirit scolded.

"I know! I won't, I'll be close by! I promiseâ€"please\_, papa?" Maka begged, giving him a wide-eyed look of hope. Spirit looked stricken, never having been good at resisting his daughters wide-eyed looks.  
"Please? I promise I won't go far!"

"Wâ€|well, I suppose so, but only if Stein accompanies you!"

"Yes! He will, thanks, papa!" Maka chimed, running past him.

"Wait, where are you going? Maka, it's dark outside!\_ You have a curfew!\_"

"Dinner with Stein! You can come, too, Marie always makes good food!"

"Dinner," Spirit sighed to himself, watching his daughter go. "Dinner sounds good right now," he told himself and brightened up at the thought of his daughter finally interacting with him normally. She seemed happy and receptive this time! No passive-aggressiveness, no bitterness, no threats to axe his head off! If she was truly coming around, Spirit really didn't want to stop the progress! He dashed after her with renewed vigor, shouting: "Wait for your papa, darling, AND SAVE HIM A SEAT RIGHT NEXT YOU!"

"No!" came her far-away cry.

Well, close enough, he decided merrily.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: \*\*This story is based off the fanart that Jazzie560 beautifully drew! If you have yet to see it, you can check her out on Tumblr or DeviantArt. She goes by the same name. However, technically speaking, this story is based off \_How to Train Your Dragon\_ and I decided to switch up the last word with \_Soul \_in the title because it plays a big part in the future...in both senses.

Enjoy!

\_Scarlett.\_

## 2. Chapter 2

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>by. <strong>\_Poisoned Scarlett\_

The sky was still a dark, bruised purple when she awoke.

She sat up in her cot, stifling a yawn and letting a shudder run down her body from the stagnant cold that filled the room overnight. The fire in the furnace had gone out by that time and Maka rubbed her hands together, wishing she had warmer blankets or some sort of heater to keep her warm during these bitter cold winter days. She slipped out of her cot and made her bed, freezing when a loud snore came from down the hall.

Her father.

She relaxed.

No need to worry there; he slept like the dead.

Maka took little time in changing and readied herself in even less time, brushing her hair and washing out her mouth. She had already packed everything the night before and Maka made sure to bring her armor this time and an extra-heavy coat to keep her warm from the mornings snowfall. Maka had been fixing the straps on her boots when she caught sight of a bundle on the dinning table. She finished with her boots and headed over to it, pulling back the messy wrapping back to find it was a tuna sandwich. A tiny smile lifted her lips and she looked down the hall to her fathers room, unable to hold back the stir of affection for the old geezer. He tried and she did give him that much, even if she was not a fan of tuna.

Maka dropped the extra sandwich into her pack and tip-toed out the door, making her way to the little shack behind their cottage. She wiggled the lock around and, as predicted, the rusty thing gave out. The shack was old and dusty, smelling thick of smoke and iron. The roof looked as if it were about to cave in at any moment but it still kept, sturdy despite its age. She was usually the only one who used the shack anymore; her father hardly bothered with it. Maka made her way to the sickle blades that hung off the splintered walls and buckled them up under her coat, adjusting them firmly so they would not fall out if she ran.

She locked the shack back up and then began her journey to Gallows Way.

It was not as arduous as she thought it would be: she made good time and the snow hadn't been deep enough to trouble her. In fact, the snow began to thin out the further she walked. That was why she reached the path earlier than she expected she would. But once she got there, she was disappointed to find nothing of interest. No tracks or trails or anything that could tell her that something had been lurking around. No dented trees, no gnawed rocks or bark. There was literally no snow in these parts, only still cold, and she looked everywhere she could and even whistled and hid behind a tree just in case. But nothing stirred, not even the leaves.

"Hell," she cursed, setting a hand on her hip. "He said he saw it here, there should at least be marks or a disturbance in the branches! Asuras can't fly," Maka grumbled, continuing her trek. They couldn't fly, but they could sure leap. Stein had told her once that he had seen one jump clear over 150 feet into the air. It certainly could not fly, but it seemed like it could. "If that drunk was imagining things againâ€|" Maka muttered under her breath, going down a swerving path until she reached a clearing.

Nothing.

It was all clear, the overcast sky not doing much to liven up her expectations.

"Well, at least I can tell everyone it's clear for now," she sighed to herself. Maka spotted a large boulder in the distance and made her way to it glumly, already reaching into her sack for some food. It would be midday soon and she would need to return quickly If she did

not want to get caught. Maka climbed the boulder and sat down on top of it, heaving a sigh and taking out the ham sandwich she had made herself. She ate quietly, marveling the peaceful scenery and pondering on where an Asura would go to sleep for the day, when a heavy exhale made her freeze. She swallowed very slowly and lowered her sandwich, shifting her eyes to the right but not daring to move any further.

More like: what would an Asura do if he caught a human unawaresâ€!

Maka felt dread chill her to the bone.

Another exhale, followed by a grunt. The ground crunched beneath heavy paws, a deep rumbling vibrating through the rock she sat on.

Maka dared to turn her head and she was not met with bulging black eyes and a hissing face, with scales as dark as night and streaks of red markings down a hunched back; no, she was met with bright red eyes and an appalling jaw full of razor sharp teeth, long and jagged with a forked tongue that hung out, dripping with blood. It was not an enormous dragon but it was sizable, with large elegant wings that folded on its back compactly and a long tail that ended with multiple spikes not unlike Clay's however there was no ball attached. There were only spikes, deadly as any other. What made her stare was the color of said dragonâ€it was white, completely white. The color was blinding in the way snow was, she'd even go as far as saying. That was how she knew it was injured: the white scales were splattered with blood and she noticed more pooling on the ground.

"Y..." She squeaked. His ears flattened at the sound and he pulled his mouth back in a snarl. "S-Soul Eater?"

No, she quickly realized. No, this was not a Soul Eater.

This was something much, much worse.

He exhaled a plume of fire when she did not move, a warning to keep her distance.

Maka kicked back when she saw it, reaching for her sickle. The instant metal gleamed under light, the dragon growled dangerously and slammed its tail on the floor in warning, baring blood-tainted teeth at her. She slipped off the boulder with a squeal but nothing more, staring at it some more once she regained her footing. She tried to figure out what type it was but every time she tried, there was something about him that did not fit the descriptions. He had most characteristics of a Soul Eater but also of a Timberjack (with his very impressive wingspan) or a Grimler (with his enormous talon-like claws, more for brute strength than agility). She really couldn't figure it out, she discovered with surprise, was this dragon an Unknown? She had studied the various types of dragons intensely yet he fit none of the descriptions.

"What are you?" Maka whispered softly. She approached him cautiously. "You look so much like a Soul Eater, but they have normal-sized snouts."

The dragon snarled in reply.

"I'm not saying you have a long snout! There's nothing wrong with it, I'm justâ€!" She pinked and glared at the flat look the dragon gave her. "This is crazy, I know what you are! You're an Unknown! You're a menace," she told him firmly and he did nothing more but give her a glacial stare. She flashed her eyes away after a second and the dragon lifted his chin triumphantly. Maka fiddled with her belt and, frustrated, looked back up to shout: "You're injured but I've no idea what you are, so I'm just going to leave! If you would stay there, we'll be fine," she told him sternly. She reached for her pack without breaking eye contact and stepped back quickly when he growled warningly, blowing out some fire from his nostrils. "I'm just going to leave youâ€|there," Maka ended lamely, her eyes dropping to the wound that reached up the pale underside of his neck. "To bleed. In peace."

The dragon made no move.

She stopped once she was a good distance away.

She had no idea what type of specie of dragon he was but surely not something she would want to figure out. She had been taught to leave Unknowns to be, especially when alone. They were the most dangerous dragons of all, if only because one did not know their characteristics or weapon traits. Maka looked back at the dragon and watched him lay his head back down, his arms trembling with the force of keeping himself upright so as not to bother his wound. He was hurt, she saw with some compassion, really hurt by the looks of it.

\_It's a new specie, \_Maka thought quietly to herself. She fidgeted. Stein would want toâ€|study it, I suppose. Perhaps...no, that's insane, he could seriously injure me and then what? No one knows where I am, they'd never find meâ€|\_

Being eighteen didn't exactly mean she had to act eighteen, she thought as she dug around in her pack. She found a roll of bandages but that was all the first-aid she had brought. She would need some water to cleanse the wound but, judging by his hostility, she doubted she could get away with cleansing the wound. But if she just stopped it from bleedingâ€| then his body could heal the rest of the wound naturally, within a few days time, and he would be up and ready by next week!

\_There is no way I can wrap these around him, he'll break my spine, \_Maka groaned to herself. She then looked down at her coat, furry and thick and \_outrageously expensive!\_ Was she really going to sacrifice a good coat for an unknown specie of dragon?

"Hey," Maka called out, nearing the dragon. It didn't move. "Are you alive? Dragon? Hello?" It still made no move and this time Maka walked with more confidence. She stopped before it and saw he had turned on his side, exposing the deep gash to her. It was an ugly wound, deep and red and painful-looking. A brawl, no doubt. She wondered if the Asura had done it to him when his tummy gave a sudden jerk and she jumped back. Then it sunk back in slowly, carefully, \_painfully\_.

He needed some real help, Maka thought somberly, a coat over his

wound was not going to help.

Maka looked around and decided bandaging him was the best option. She knew a lot about medicinal plants and where to find them and their forest was rich in these herbs. Marie often took her when she was young to pick them, as the woman was a Healer in their village, and she taught her how to mix and make certain medicines for a variety of wounds. Gash wounds like the ones that dragon bore were not a rarity in her village and Maka knew enough to at least extend his life enough for him to heal naturally. She plucked a few she thought would help, trying to be quick about it, and grabbed a couple of rocks before she ran back to the clearing. The dragon was still there, his breathing heavier than normal and now completely on his side from the pain. She was quick to smash everything into a paste and ready the bandages. She also took out her flask of water; the wound definitely needed to be cleaned one way or another!

Marie stressed about cleaning the wound first.

She didn't know if this applied to dragons, but better safe than sorry.

Once she was ready and had gathered her wits, Maka approached the dragon nervously.

"Hey! Psst!" She poked his arm with the tip of her boot and jumped away. He didn't react so she got closer. Maka opened her flask of water and sprayed it over his tummy. This time he did react, a violent roar escaping his mouth. However, that was all: he only jerked and squirmed afterward and Maka ignored her fear to let the water rain down his cut, the blood washing away into a sickly pink dye on the ground. That was the most she could do to cleanse the wound, she thought worriedly.

The next part was the really, really dangerous part.

Somehow, she needed to apply the paste on the wound and bandage him up.

Maka approached him quietly after letting his pain subside, looking at his wound with a gulp. If she could just carefully dump the paste over him and then gently pat it down his wound...then everything would be fine because at least she got something to help speed up the healing process and stop the bleeding. She had only managed to grab a chunk of the paste and hover over his belly, leaning over dangerously. She hadn't wanted to get any closer than that. In her caution, she had failed to notice the dragons eyes snap open. The snarl made her gasp and lose her balance. She fell on her knees, the dragons claws just missing her. He roared, reaching over with his frightening teeth to nip at her. She felt the intense heat of its breath on her cheek and her heart stopped.

"NO! STOP!" She shouted, holding a hand out. He did and growled lowly, his crimson eyes dark and dangerous. "I want to help you!" she choked, very aware of just how uncomfortably close his claws were to her waist. "You're dying," she told him. He made no move. "I can help youâ€"look, if I put this on your wound, it'll help stop the bleeding just enough for you to heal by yourself," she told him sincerely. "I don't want to hurt you."

She shakily rose her hand up to him and he darted his eyes to it silently. He looked back up at her, keeping his eyes fixed on her eyes as she tremulously drew her hand closer. His eyes darted to it, but looked back at her every few seconds.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she soothed. "I promise." She could feel the heat radiate off his arm from how close her hand was. "Just let me help you." She swallowed the lump in her throat and pressed her hand against his arm courageously. She felt muscle tense up and she became rigid, her stomach plummeting, her eyes snapping shut, but he didn't move. Eventually, he relaxed, and when she slid her hand tentatively up the smooth and armor-hard scales of his arm, he stayed still. She exhaled the breath she hadn't known she was holding and opened her eyes, pulling her hand back. They both held each others gazes for a while, coming to an agreement, and when Maka felt more assured he would not hurt her, she knelt and looked back at his wound.

He'd need stitches, but she doubted he would let her do that.

"This is going to sting," Maka told him. The dragon darted his eyes to the mush in her hand with clear distaste. "But it's going to help you. Until you're strong enough to heal up on your own, this will speed up the scarring process and keep any infection away." She carefully began to spread it over his belly. He snarled and she froze up but when he only laid his head back down and gave a weakened whine, she continued. She managed to spread it over the majority of the wound, the biggest parts. The closer she drew, the more she could see that he was already healing. There was some scarring but not enough. Maka quickly grabbed her bandages, wiping the blood and mashed herbs up on her skirt, and quickly placed strips of gauze over the gash. She didn't have enough to wrap around him but she just needed to cover up the worst of the wound.

After that, she stepped back and smiled at her handiwork. She looked to find the dragon watching her with one eye open.

"Creep," she scoffed and the dragon shut his eye with a lofty harrumph. She went back to her pack and rummaged inside, finding the extra sandwich her father had made her and an apple she had packed. Her father might have made it for her with good intentions but she was not a fan of fish. Perhaps the dragon would be. "Here, I hope you like tuna. That's all I have. And an apple, you can eat that, too. Dragons eat apples, right?"

The dragon lifted his head up a little, watching curiously as she approached his mouth. She placed both items near his head and backed away. She watched him turn his head and reach painfully, nipping at the food and groaning helplessly when he found he couldn't eat it.

"Okay, so maybe I need to feed them to you," Maka decided, after watching one last feeble attempt at trying to eat it. She picked up the sandwich first and held it over him. "Open!" He stared at her blankly. She made opening motions, jutting her lip out when he continued to stare blankly. "C'mon, open and you get to eat! If not, fine, you can starve!"

He opened immediately.

Funny, she thought, it was almost like he understood her.

Maka carefully dropped it in and squeaked when his jaws snapped shut, nearly taking her fingers with it. She glared horribly as he chewed, a sort of smugness she didn't like glinting in his red eyes. "You bastard, you did that on purpose!" He only swallowed. Maka picked up the apple and waggled it in his face warningly. "Do that again and I'll starve you. I'll do it, don't tempt me!" She dropped it in his mouth and this time he didn't snap his mouth shut. He closed it lazily and chewed. "I don't have anymore food butâ€œ," she winced when he moaned, a mournful sound to her ears. "I would have brought more if I had known I was going to find an injured dragon!" She grumbled. He flopped his head back in reply, shifting a little to adjust himself more comfortably.

"I can go get you some water from the stream up ahead but that's all I can do for now," she told him apologetically and he made a noise in the back of his throat. Vocal dragon, she thought to herself, definitely more understanding than most others. Although, that might be because he sensed she meant no harm and it helped that she, technically, had the upper hand over him since he was injured.

That was how she left him that day, giving him water (three trips, to her disgruntlement) and leaving him be on the cold floor.

"Do dragons get cold?"

He didn't say anything.

"I can loan you my coat butâ€œ; I don't think I would make it very far without it." She looked up at the sun, finding it already on its way down. She would reach her home when it was dark and by that time, it would be too cold to be without a coat. She would freeze. "It's snowing in my village." She stood up. "I should get going. They must be wondering where I am by now."

He regarded her calmly, watching her stand up and dust herself off. Then he closed his eyes with a rough exhale and she figured that was the most thanks she was going to get, along with the fact that he spared her life. She shouldered her pack and made her way back home without another word, looking back a few times as she did, finding the white-scaled dragon rather lonely against the backdrop of lush green forest terrain.

### 3. Chapter 3

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett</strong>

She blamed the white-scaled dragon for this.

Maka crept into the mess hall and looked both ways, relieved to find the dining area free of anyone. She had just returned the riding seat and other accessories she had used for Clay, as Clay was no longer hers to train, when she was struck with an idea. That was what found her here contemplating theft for a creature who had nearly bit off her fingers when she tried being nice to him. The cooks had just set out the plates of sandwiches for the second years; Maka only hoped

they would understand that this was much more important, as she dumped an entire plate of sandwiches into her pack before moving onto the next dish.

She left the other three plates alone. A dozen sandwiches should satisfy the dragon, she hoped.

However, right after taking them, she wanted to put them back\_. Maka was not in the habit of stealing, but she didn't have the wherewithal to buy this much food on her own. Her father did, however if she asked him for money, he would know she disobeyed him and went out past the perimeter. He would probably lock her up in her room if he knew she was tending to an injured dragon, an Unknown at that! Maka looked back at the empty plates and sighed. Well, she did attend classes so the food was technically for her as well. Maka had just finished zipping up her bag, scurrying to the table at the very end of the mess hall, immersing herself in her book to calm her heart, when one of her friends found her.

"HEY, MAKAL!" He bellowed, happily. "WHERE WERE YOU YESTERDAY? I WANTED TO SHOW YOU THIS NEAT TRICK I TAUGHT MIFUNE! EVEN THE STRIPED BASTARD LIKED IT!"

"Black Star," Maka sighed in relief, hoping he would not notice the fact that two whole platters of sandwiches had been mysteriously wiped clean. She spared a glance at the sun through the window as her friend ambled towards her, already rattling off the details. It was still very early; she had enough time to go visit the dragon at Gallows Way. "Don't call Kidd that, you know he hates it when you bring his hair up."

"Feh, I say nothing that isn't true!" Black Star dismisses, slamming a palm on the table. "His hair is weird!"

"You're not so normal yourself," Maka dryly reminded, looking at his hair. It reflected almost blue under the light and it became lighter during the summer, when the sun had time to bleach his hair. Black Star pointedly ignored that, changing the subject to sparring. "Are you still going on about that? I can't spar with you today, Black Star. I was busy yesterday and I'm busy now!"

"Busy reading yer huge books isn't busy at all," he stated, matter-of-factly.

"What would you know? You barely know how to read the market signs!"

"NO! I CAN SO!" He was quick to defend, sending her a glare when she smirked. "Bah! Who needs books? They're huge and smell bad, like my fathers sock drawer! C'mon, come with me to the training grounds! I finally taught Mifune how to do a flip and y'know how hard it is to get that bastard to do anything!!"

"Black Star, training a dragon doesn't mean teaching them how to do flips\_. You should really focus on aerial combat," Maka chided. "Stein will be the one holding your final exam, you know!"

"Joykill," he scowled. "So where's yours, huh? Aren't you supposed to be training, too? We could do it togetherâ€"I hear Kidd'll be out

there in a few hours! We can all spar together!" He tempted, already cracking his black-tapped knuckles in anticipation. He was bare-chested today save for the leather vest he wore over himself, his pants as dark as night with boots to match, strapped in place with equally black buckles. Black Star was the strongest of them all and it was visible in the way his muscles flexed beneath his skin, rock solid and strong enough to pound through stone if he tried.

And he had once

"I can't," Maka hunched, souring again. "I don't have a \_dragon\_."

"Whatâ€œohâ€œ!" Black Star awkwardly scratched the back of his head.  
"Again?"

"Yes."

"When are you getting a new one?"

"Next half-moon."

"If you'd just stick with a dragon already, we could be training and getting stronger! We're gonna' be legendary, remember? We can't do this without you!" he bluntly told her and she scowled. She knew that although she was skeptical about the legendary part. But she was resolute in becoming the strongest Meister their village had. "Well, I'd ask if you wanna' spar with me anyway butâ€œ!"

"No."

"Whatever, you could still spar with us! You don't have to have a dragon!"

"I kind of do," Maka arched a brow at him. Black Star scoffed, not too concerned about the rules. "Training grounds are only accessible to those with a dragon!"

"So?" Black Star scoffed. "Not like Stein'll care!"

"He'll scold me if I do!"

"So, what? Nothing new!"

"Black Star, no!"

"C'mon, don't be such a dung head!"

Her fists clenched, she snapped her head up, and he would swear he saw Helheim's cold fire in her green eyes. "What the hell did you just call me?"

He laughed nervously before a giant grin married his face, an idea lighting his eyes. She would break a table over his head if he tried baiting her, but that was one way to get her to engage. "YOU HEARD ME!"

"Say it to my face," Maka hissed, her eyes narrowed.

"I called you a dung head, rhymes with shit head," he grinned

viciously and Maka growled, her hands fisting. She knew exactly what he was trying to do; that idiot was too transparent. When she sharply stood up, Black Star immediately took a defensive stance, his grin challenging and his eyes taunting. "What're you gonna' do about it, huh, Maka? You wanna' go?! I'll take you on right here, right now!"

She grabbed her bag off the floor with a sniff. "You're a moron, Black Star. Go pick a fight elsewhere, I'm busy."

He deflated at her tone. "Doing \_what\_?"

"Errands!" Maka answered as she walked away, a book crammed under her arm and the weight of her bag staining the straps. "I'll be back later! I promise I'll beat you up later!"

"Eh? AS IF! You haven't kicked my ass since we were twelve! I'm stronger now!" He shouted at her backside.

Maka only waved.

"Wait a second, where are you?" Black Star scowled when the doors closed behind her instead and he set his hand on his waist. He scratched his head and shrugged. Maka always had a agenda to fulfill, he did not question her anymore. "Whatever, I'll teach Mifune how to \_double\_ flip and then she'll be jealous and wish she had never given up Clay!" He ran back out, grinning widely at the thought.

Maka managed to slide past the guards sights' without any trouble, taking a less-known path out of the village. She hurried to Gallows Way today, hauling her pack on her shoulder. She quickly made her way down a slope of a hill, stopping only to shake out her furred boots from the snow that had piled up on them. When she made it to the clearing, her sights swinging to the boulder far right, she found the white-scaled dragon right where she had left him the day before. She felt her heart weigh for the creature; it was a sad sight, him lying so helpless and without the pride most dragons had. To see a dragon hurt or crippled always made her a little emotional, that was why Marie often suggested she should take up Healer classes instead of combat classes.

But Maka would always prefer fighting to healing; she was just not the nursing-type in the end.

When she approached, the dragons eyes snapped open and he bared his teeth at her. But at the sight of her, he stopped and watched with a surprise usually reserved for humans. The dragon was unnervingly intelligent and it intrigued her greatly. If this Unknown turned out to be extremely intelligent then perhaps he could be a sort of scout for the village. Stein had been trying to teach various types of dragons to scout and return, but...

She admired him for trying, at least.

"I have more sandwiches today!" Maka told the dragon happily. She opened the bag and he perked up immediately, wincing when he bothered his wound in his haste. "Calm down, you'll get your fill soon!" she admonished gently and reached in to grab four sandwiches. They were a mix of tuna and ham and she hoped he liked both because she had been too paranoid to really care about which she took. "Open!"

He did and she dropped them in one by one, laughing when he swallowed them hungrily and eagerly opened his mouth for more. The dragon really did remind her of a household pet sometimes. Although he had a dark sense of humor, given he liked to pretend to snap at her fingers when she fed him, he showed obedience to her when she told him to stop or else she would let him starve. However, that could be because the dragon was actually starving and would benefit from being obedient, if only for the food. Maka appreciated his obedience, nonetheless.

She shook her bag out and a few apples rolled out. This time, the dragon managed to get one in his mouth using his tongue. Maka bit into one herself, observing his wound. She crawled closer to him, grabbing the new clean set of bandages she had brought along as well. She reached for the soaked-red bandage and peeled it off, finding his wound no better than yesterday but a lot less wet. Some of the blood had crusted over and she couldn't see much new blood. It was a definite improvement from yesterday. She changed his bandages quickly and, when he wasn't looking, ran her fingers over his scales in quiet awe. It was like armor, perhaps stronger than that, but his belly was soft and bouncy.

"You're really cold," Maka commented with worry, resting her hand on his arm. "Are you sure you're~~'~~hey, that's mine!" Maka scrambled to save her apple from his tongue. "Ugh, gross, you got drool over it, you big goof!" She wrinkled her nose and sent him a glare. "That's so disgusting!" She exhaled a sigh and tossed it at him, bemusedly watching as he snapped his jaws over it and munched drowsily. "Glutton dragon~~'~~."

He only slumped back and exhaled deeply.

She stayed with him longer this time, feeling comfortable in his presence now that she was sure he would not harm her. She talked to him a lot today. She talked to him a lot more than she did Clay, and she did quite a lot of talking with him. But these weren't orders or commands or scolds; this was conversation. This was normal. She didn't know if he understood her or not, but sometimes he did things that made her think he did know what she was talking about even though she highly doubted it. Dragons were much like animals in that respect and however intelligent this dragon might come off as, he couldn't have understood everything. But it was still a nice thought and that was why she kept talking. Conversation shifted to silence, as he snoozed beside her and she rested against the boulder, her eyes gazing up at the darkening sky. She had been contemplating leaving when he tried to roll on his back, a howl startling her from her thoughts.

"Ah! No, you idiot, don't move! You'll reopen your wound!" Maka gasped, pressing her hand over him to stop him. He growled when she touched too close to his eye but she ignored it. "I know it's uncomfortable, but you have to turn back on your side~~'~~Oh, you're bleeding! Look!" She rubbed his cheek and he exhaled sharply, grunting when he made the effort to push back on his side. She helped him, but admitted she couldn't have moved him at all if she tried. It was the thought that counted. "Don't move anymore, okay?" Maka told him, rubbing his cheek again more for her nerves than his. "It's really deep but you're healing. Maybe now that you ate something, you'll heal faster!"

He didn't do anything, just let her rub his cheek before she slid her hand off and backed away. She looked up at the sky again, knowing she was cutting it very close this time. But she was reluctant to leave the injured creature to himself. What if he decided to move again?

"I'll come back tomorrow! I'll bring more food for you, too!" She promised him. "I'll try to come early, so just wait for me here!" She shouldered her pack and made her way home after a second of hesitation. Like yesterday, she looked over her shoulder a few times and every time she did, he remained just as she had left him.

The only difference was this time he watched her leave.

\* \* \*

><p>"Makaâ€|" Spirit began that morning, watching his daughter scarf down her breakfast as if she had not eaten in days. "I asked Stein how your training was goingâ€|"</p>

"Mhm."

"And he said you had given up your dragon already. A fortnight ago, in fact."

Maka froze. She snapped her head up at him and found him staring back at her, stone-faced. "Um, well, I did. Butâ€"!"

"Where have you been going these past two weeks?"

Maka cringed at his edgy tone. Truth be told, she had been making trips up to where she left the dragon. He wasn't bleeding out anymore, per say, he could actually move around freely. Once he had been able to sit up on himself, she started to refer to him as Soul since he reminded her a lot of a Soul Eater. He had wrinkled his nose at the name, but eventually he grew into it. He responded to it, anyway.

It had been only four days ago when she returned and found the spot she usually found him in empty. She had been extremely disheartened and more than a little sad, thinking he had left already and gone back to who-knows-where, when he nudged his snout into her back and scared the living soul out of her. She swore he was laughing; that was why she threw a sandwich at him although he caught that and ate it instead. From therein, however, he meet her up by the boulder when the sun was just reaching the middle of the sky.

In fact, just yesterday she had found him curled up by the boulder as if waiting for her. The thought made her feel warm; she was really starting to like this dragon and she hoped he liked her as well.

"I'veâ€|okay, you caught me," Maka gave a sigh and Spirit sat up, rigid. "I've been training with Black Star and Kidd. I just feel like my combat skills are lacking compared to the other girls, so I've been spending all this time getting better!" Maka managed a grin when her father's shoulders relaxed.

"Oh, that would explain why you've been eating a lot more,

too!"

Maka twitched at that. Not only was the dragon making her an honorary thief, but now making her appear like some glutton! She made a note to whack him when she saw him later today and turned back to her father when he spoke:

"But, Maka, it's fine if you aren't that well-verses in combat. Once you get a dragon, he will be doing most of the fighting for you and there's hardly fights to begin with. You won't be going into battle right away," he told her with a smile.

"I know but Black Star can punch through a rock!" Maka quickly said.

Spirit laughed outright at that. "Black Star was born with strange powers! And why would you even want to punch through a rock? I don't recall you being so interested in combatâ€œ"!"

"It's because, um, he teases me!"

"Oh," Spirit frowned. His eyes narrowed. "Teases you, eh? I don't like the sound of that."

"Yeah! So, I have to beat him. Listen, I'm late for training with him right now so I have to go! I'll see you later, papa, bye!" Maka rushed and stood up in a clamor of armor, shoving her chair in and grabbing her heavy pack. Spirit noticed the straps were rather worn but before he could comment on it, his daughter had already run out of the house.

Maka didn't go to Gallows Way right away. She made a detour to Black Star's home and knocked fervently, blowing breath into her hands because she had forgotten her gloves in her haste. The days were cold and snowy still and the sky did not look like it would let up any time soon.

"Hello, Nygus!" Maka beamed up at the middle-aged woman, who brightened upon seeing her.

"Well, hello to you, too, Maka! What a pleasure to see you so early in the morning. What brings this visit?"

"Is Black Star home? I have to ask him something!"

"He's in the kitchen now, actually, eating his life out," Nygus rolled her eyes and welcomed her inside. The interior of their cottage was toasty warm and cozy, with their furniture cramped together almost as if it would overlap if she so much as moved anything. Yet it was very easy to maneuver her way around inside; such was the paradox of Nygus' home. She found Sid and Black Star sitting at the dining table, the former tinkering around with one of the newer helmets they were making (he worked hard and long as a blacksmith for their village) while Black Star literally stuffed himself. Nygus hadn't been wrong there.

"Aye Mapaaaaaa!" Black Star muffled out, swallowing.

"Black Star, you talk with your mouth full one more time in the presence of a lady and I will smack you," Nygus warned, waving her

wooden spoon at him warily. Maka eyed her warily.

"Feh! \_Lady!\_ It's just \_Maka\_â€"OUCH!"

\_Watch your mouth,\_ Sid warned lowly, shifting his sight to his mouthy son. Black Star grinned in reply and Sid sighed, returning to his work.

Black Star turned back to Maka, still rubbing the spot on his arm where Sid had smacked him with his tool. "What is it, Maka? You finally here to see Mifune do a flip? I taught 'em how to do three in a row! It's amazing! I think I finally got to him, which isn't so surprising since I \_am \_the great Black Star!"

"That's great and all, Star, but I have to tell you something! It involves Kidd," she added quickly to remove suspicions. She saw movement in the corner of her eye and she turned to face Black Star's father, who was seemingly done with whatever he had been doing. "Good morning, Sid!"

"Morning, Maka!" Sid looked up from his work, smiling. "I haven't seen you face around here very often. Been seein' Kidd a lot more these days." His eyes were black like Nygus, perhaps darker still. He was a tall man, strong from years of working with metal. His skin was a light tan like Nygus' and while Black Star's was tan from being in the sun during long summer days, you could tell the boy did not quite fit in with the pair. There was very little resemblance between them, especially when one looked at Black Star's strangely colored hair. That was because Black Star had been adopted into their family when he was an infant. He had been found by Sid when he went to go aid a neighboring village after a dragon devastation and he had found him, sobbing and cold, under some debris. He hadn't had the heart to just leave him in the care of one of the midwives who had been willing to care for the children who had unfortunately lost their parents, and so he had adopted him as his son. Nygus had received him with open arms.

"Ah, yes, sorry I haven't come to visit. I've been...\_training\_, a lot," she scratched the back of her neck meekly.

"\_TRAINING?\_ ARE YOU TRYING TO ONE-UP \_ME\_, THE GREAT BLACK STAR?" Black Star screeched, slitting his eyes at her. His chair screeched back and he pointed a finger at Maka, but before he could open his big mouth, Nygus threw her spoon at him.

Sid flashed her a grin, not at all ruffled by his sons outburst. "Training, huh? Well, I have some good news for you! Look at this new helmet I'm making! All titanium, eh? And this time, it covers the ears and neck! I plan on having it be a training helmet, thicker to shield against fire attacks and some acid as well! But it's still a little too heavyâ€|. " Sid trailed off thoughtfully. He dropped it and it left a dent in the table. Black Star burst out laughing. Nygus stared and narrowed her eyes dangerously. Sid grinned at her nervously and added, "But giving up isn't the type of man I am! I'll have this fixed soon!"

"I can't wait to try it out one day, Sid," Maka offered.

"Don't encourage him," Nygus muttered to her, watching her husband return to his prototype-helmet. "That's the second table this

month."

"So, anyway!" Black Star loudly said, not taking lightly to being ignored. "Does Kidd finally wanna' fight me?"

Maka nodded.

He flashed her a sharp grin. "Alright, let's go! Bye, ma', I'll be back later!" Black Star shouted at Nygus, who rolled her eyes at her exuberant son. Maka waved at them both, already making her way to the door. "Bye, old man!"

"That's Sid to you!"

"And I am the Great Black Star!"

He snorted out a chuckle but returned to his helmet, Nygus waving at the two with a smile before she went back to clean up the dishes.

"Alright," the Trainer began once they were ways away from his home. "So what's this about trainingâ€?"

"It isn't. I lied. Black Star, this is serious, you have to listen to me!" Maka told him quickly. He frowned but complied, crossing his arms over his chest to hear her out. "Hey, aren't you cold?" She asked suddenly, belatedly noticing he had run out without a coat. Black Star snorted and waved his hand at her, saying something about mortals and their 'cold'. "Well, listen, I've been going out to Gallows Way andâ€!"

"You've been going out of the village? Maka, you know how dangerous it is to go out right now," Black Star warned, his brows creased disapprovingly. "An Asura is out there andâ€!"

"I know that, but there's nothing there! Just listen for once, you idiot!" Maka snapped. She took a breath. "I found a dragon."

"YOU FINALLY FOUND Aâ€"mmpfh!"

"Shhh!" Maka hissed, slapping a hand over his mouth. Nineteen and he was still as loud-mouthed as a ten year old. "Not so loud, Black Star! I found a dragon and he was hurt, so I've been taking care of him these past two weeks! I told my father that I had been training Clay and he just found out this isn't true, so I told him that I had really been training with you and Kidd. So if he comes to ask or to see, you must not tell him the truth!"

"That you're completely nuts for going to care for a stray dragon?" Black Star pushed her hand off his mouth, frowning at her. "What kind is it?"

Maka hesitated. "I-I don't know."

"You don't know?" His eyes rounded. She could see the concern on his face, the grimacing look that said he did not like this as much as she did. Black Star might be a buffoon in more than one way but he knew well enough that Unknown dragons weren't ones to linger around. Stein often said that there were many, many different types of dragons in the vast world that had yet to be documented, but he also

stressed the dangers of encountering one of those undocumented dragons. There had been many in their village, and surrounding villages, who had fallen victims to Unknowns because they did not know how to defend themselves against a creature they knew nothing of. Because of that, there was a new class for the first and second years that Stein taught so they knew how to handle themselves against one.

"I know it sounds bad but he's a really sweet dragon, okay? He lets me pet him and-and I've treated his wounds! He's better now! He can move around and he hasn't hurt me! He won't! I \_know\_ he won't," Maka told him honestly. Black Star could read the desperation for him to understand in her eyes.

He weighed the pros and cons of going along with this crazy plan of hers for a second before sighing, scratching the back of his head. "Well, I guess. I mean, at least you have a dragon now. Maybe then we can spar like old times."

"Yess! Thank you!" Maka squealed, hugging him. Black Star rolled his eyes but patted her back, letting her go when she jumped back and began to walk away. "I owe you one, Black Star! Tell Kidd about it, too! Just in case! I don't know where he's been these past couple of days!"

"He's been on a mission to find the Asura!" Black Star shouted back.

Maka froze. "What? What mission? I haven't heard of any missions!"

"Maybe if you weren't with your \_dragon\_ \_all day...\_"

"Tell me about the mission!"

Black Star approached her, not looking too pleased either. "Well, they recruited some of the best Meister's we have awhile back and your old man sent them out two days ago. They've been scouting Gallows Way and all the surrounding areas recently in search for the Asura. There's been more spotting's recently by the east but keep your eyes open. Kidd told me they'll be going to investigate Gallows Way again one of these days. From what he told me, they think Gallows Way might be where the Asura has been nesting."

Maka nodded, troubled. "I'll be careful. Thanks, Black Star."

"Yeah, no problem. Better go now, I'll tell Kidd as soon as I see 'em!" He grinned. Then a shudder ran up and down his body. "Shit, it's freezing!"

"Go put on a coat before you catch something!" Maka shouted over her shoulder in goodbye, feeling her stomach roll with thought of what could happen if one of the Meister's caught sight of her white-scaled dragon. She knew he waited for her by the boulder when the sun was just reaching its peak in the sky but where did he go the other hours? She spent the majority of the afternoon and evening talking to him, sometimes actually playing with him because he was gentle and didn't try to sever her neck like Clay. She wondered this as she walked, making sure to keep an eye out for any strange shapes in the sky.

She hadn't seen anything these past few days, but if what Black Star told her was true then she might encounter one of the Meister's. She had been thinking of changing their meeting place somehow, the snow thinning out beneath her boots as the air became colder, when she heard the roar of a dragon and the sound of trees falling victim to it. It was a familiar roar, actually, and Maka felt her heart drop to her ankles. She ran the rest of the way, cutting through the forest this time while her heart thudded in her ears from her panic.

But when she arrived, she found Soul shaking himself off and growling at a squirrel. He froze when he saw her, panting and windblown, and meandered over curiously, forgetting about the woodland animal. She exhaled a relieved breath and placed a hand on his snout when he was close enough.

"You scared me," she told him honestly. "I thought something had happened to you. A few men from my village are checking around here to find the Asura. It was spotted here some time ago, although we both know he isn't here, hm?" Maka walked forward, letting her hand run down the slope of his neck, and smiled when he followed her. "But I can't tell them that, I'm not even supposed to be here! Ahh, you're making me break all the rules," she giggled at him.

Maka sat by the boulder and pulled out a sandwich from her pack.

She tore it in half and gave him the bigger piece, nibbling on her own while Soul swallowed his piece in one bite. She told him about her day so far, how Black Star continued to harass her to train with them and how she hardly saw her friend Kiddâ€"not since he became head of the Meister's and planning and special training began to swallow up his time. She told him how she rather missed being with her two friends, how it had been a long while since she spent time with anyone because Black Star had a dragon and Kidd had a duty to fulfill. She was the one being left behind because she couldn't find the right dragon, she told him morosely.

Maka sunk back, staring at her boots glumly.

"When we were small, we promised each other that when we had dragons, we would form a team and be the best team there was. We'd be legendary and bring pride to our village," Maka told him softly, smiling as she remembered Black Star's words. Then her eyes lowered bitterly, starting to sting with tears. "But they've both had their dragons for over a year now and I haven't been able to keep one for even a month..."

Maka startled out of her gloom when Soul nudged his snout under her chin. She tried to be annoyed with him, but eventually he got a laugh out of her. She reached up to stroke his cheek and laughed when he exhaled through his nose, tickling her cheek. Suddenly, his snout reached underneath her arm and Maka squealed when he lifted her on her feet with a jerk. She nearly tipped over but he steadied her when he looped her arm around his neck, lifting her up off the floor.

"S-Soul, what are you doing?! PUT ME DOWN!" Maka screeched, clinging onto his neck. She realized, with a gulp, that she had completely underestimated his height. "You'll open your wounds if you keep this upâ€"I SAID PUT ME DOWN, YOU LIZARD!"

He huffed out air rebelliously, his wings unfurling. Maka felt her stomach drop to the floor. "Oh, no. No, we-we don't have the proper equipment forâ€"THISSS!" and he lifted off the floor so effortlessly, so easily, Maka was stunned for the first few seconds of flight. Then his wings flapped and freezing wind rushed her and the safety of the ground seemed so far off, almost impossible to reach again. It was only when she realized she could see the tree tops that she screamed and scrambled to crawl on his back, her hands slipping off the smooth scales of his back. He suddenly stopped flapping his wings and dropped a few feet, using gravity to lift her up enough to set her on his back.

"IF YOU DROP ME, I'LL KILL YOU, SOUL!" Maka screamed, burying her face into the back of his neck. But it wasn't very comfortableâ€"it felt like she was hugging rock, which didn't help matters at all since it also felt as if she did not have much grip. Maka dug her heels into the joint of his wings and screamed when he picked up altitude, releasing a roar that made her grin despite herself. Maka also discovered that the higher they flew, the calmer things were. The few clouds in the sky were peaceful, shrouding the world below enough to make her forget all her woes. The wind was absolutely terrible at this height, biting her skin and making her nose feel numb, but it was refreshing and beautiful, seeing the world from such great heights. It made her troubles seem so small compared to the rest of the world.

"How far are we going to go?" Maka shouted, glaring when he only picked up speed. "You damnâ€"AHH!" Maka's eyes rounded when he dove down. She would swear that she felt as if her stomach had pushed up into her throat, but just as she thought she'd choke on her own screams, he lifted up again and she felt weightless, free. She laughed into his ear and the dragon slowed down at the sound, a content rumble resounding in his chest. He cruised the rest of the way, allowing her some time to recover. Soul had been eying a river contemplatively when he felt her pull on his ears.

"Land, now!" Maka hissed fervently, pushing him down. "Hurry before they spot us! Soul!" He looked ahead and felt his spikes start to retract in anticipation for a fight. He could spot two figures ahead and one deep inhale proved his suspicions correct: dragons with humans. Hunters, which meant prey for him. Before he could speed up and catch up with them, the girl on his back kicked his wing hard enough to make him falter. He looked back with a growl but she flicked his nose, her green eyes staring into his boldly. She was bolder than most humans, to hold his gaze as if he were her equal. She said something and he did not understand until she kicked his wing again and nudged downward. The human did not want to fight, he realized distastefully, was she a coward? She did not strike him as one; she was braver than most, if any, he had ever seen before. This flight had proved to him that she was worthy of his strength, for not only did she hold on but she guided him as well.

"DOWN!" She growled and he held her eyes for a second longer before begrudgingly obeying her. Once he landed on the floor, bending down so she could slip off, he watched the human stagger a few steps and look at the sky with apprehension. He was amused by it all, amused by her most of all. She kept his attention and most things bored him after a few hours, sometimes minutes. But she didn't; she kept things novel, interesting. She was fierce, stern, but carefree enough to

play fetch with him (a game he guiltily admitted to liking although his elder brother would laugh at him if he ever knew) and she petted him unlike others have. Others would never dare lay a hand on him. But she did, she dared to.

"You need to stay hidden, you're lucky those two didn't spot us or we would be in so much trouble!"

He didn't understand most of what she said but he knew the gist of what she wanted, what she told him, by observing her expressions, her fidgets and swallows. She was nervous right now. Those two dragons had made her nervous. He nudged her shoulder and she pet his cheek, something that soothed his irritation at the two mix-breeds who had frightened this human girl he'd taken a liking to.

"Just stay out sight," she told him. He cocked his head to his side; he couldn't make sense of her expression. She made various gestures, to the sky and to the trees, and that nervous look returned to her face. After a few minutes of trying to understand what she meant, it clicked. Hide, she meant \_hide\_. He growled at her, his eyes narrowing with dislike. Someone like him did not \_hide\_, others hid from \_him!\_

She then touched his neck, the scarring wound that had opened a little with the events of the day.

"You're hurt, you can't fight like this. You'll lose," she held his eyes again. She was such a bold human, looking at him like that. He could have her head, could butcher her to pieces or burn her until she was nothing but ashes, and yet she still held his eyes. She dared to. He blew out a grudging breath and she smiled, caressing his cheek until he rumbled contently.

He would listen to her, but just this once.

#### 4. Chapter 4

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett

"Maka," he called out, raising a hand in greeting. The mess hall was loud with the laughs and chatter of potential Meister's, all feasting on the lunch the chef's had prepared. He figured he would find the girl here; it was the only other place she could be, aside from the training grounds or her home and he had checked both already. He smiled when she perked up, a familiar tome clutched in her arms. There had never been a time when he had not seen her with either a book or an axe. She had not changed and he could not help his relief at the thought.

"Kidd!" She beamed, standing up. She quickly bade goodbye to a few friends who had caught her earlier and picked up a bag from beside her, jogging to him. The bag was bulging, heavier than he remembered it to be. He wondered if her father had finally caved and wandered out of the village to acquire new books for his daughter. "I haven't seen you in such a long time! How have you been?"

"Busy, but I am adapting well to the workload," Kidd assured, crossing his arms. She noticed his entire arms were bandaged with new

cloth and wondered if Black Star had caught him earlier. Kidd always had difficulty with bandages. "Being a Meister is a lot of work. I'm sure you'll have no problem when you earn the title, however."

She deflated at the comment. "If I ever become a Meister! Finding a dragon to train with is difficult."

His eyes widened. "What happened to Clay?"

"I gave him back," Maka admitted. She looked sidelong, not wanting to see the sympathy in his eyes. It always made her failure a lot heavier to bear when it was Kidd who gave her that look. After all, Kidd was like a sibling to her and one of the few Maka wanted to walk on even-ground with. He had already become a Meister and Black Star was well on his way to becoming one. She was the only one left. "He was too unruly for me to tame, and his pranks really got on my nerves." The corner of her mouth twitched at the memories.

"Clay has always been special," Kidd sighed. He had been the one to drag the oaf back to the Keeper's lair when he escaped once. "I don't blame you for giving him back. Stein must have had one too many drinks the day he allowed you to try and tame Clay. He's still too immature to handle official training."

"Are you done with your scouting, Kidd?" Maka asked, changing the subject.

"No," Kidd frowned. "You've heard, correct?"

"About the Asura? Yes. Do you have any leads on its whereabouts?"

"Not as of yet, it seems to have disappeared completely. We found some evidence of its hoard down south, however its nowhere near any villages. Your father wants us to search one more day," Kidd told her.

"What do you think?" Maka asked, knowing her friend's intuition was often more accurate than her father's.

"I believe we should stop now. There is no traces of an Asura lingering around these parts, hence there's no reason we should continue searching. However, we have found a lot of Monstrous Nightmares by the mountainsides."

"Monstrous Nightmares are common around this time," Maka reminded. Monstrous Nightmares often traveled down the mountains for the winter, when the temperatures on the mountain dropped too low for them to bear. It was not rare to have them cause a ruckus a few times throughout the cold season. "Does something bother you?"

"There's too many," Kidd told her, grimly. "There are far too many to be normal. We've never had more than five at a time, I've already recorded more than ten unique tracks."

"Do you think it's related to the Asura?"

"It would not be unreasonable to assume the Asura hoarded Monstrous Nightmares. They're known to hoard a variety of dragons," Kidd reasoned.

"Monstrous Nightmares cannot be tamed. They're only fair to their own," Maka frowned. "What would an Asura be doing with them?" Stein, as well as the other Keepers from other villages, had tried to observe a Monstrous Nightmare before. Needless to say, it did not end well, and Stein had decided that they were too much of a close-knit pack to ever allow someone outside of their own specie to interact with them. They rarely interacted with others dragons, trying to have someone tame them was too dangerous.

"Even if the Asura has nothing to do with them, there is an alarming amount of them coming down from the mountains," Kidd told her, wrapping up their conversation. "They're a danger to us. If four could devastate an entire village, what of a dozen? Two dozen? We cannot take the risk. I came here to ask that if you see Elizabeth, forbid her from going on any missions. It's too dangerous," he told her, firmly.

"Liz will gut you for this, you know," Maka said with a slight smirk. "She doesn't like being on the sidelines."

A faint smile briefed his face and Maka saw his eyes soften at the thought of Liz. Maka was not very interested in the intimate lives of her friends, but this pair was one of the few that was more than obvious. She wondered if he would ever tell her his feelings as he said, "I'll deal with the consequences later. Promise me you will tell her."

"I will," Maka promised, offering a smile. "You better hurry before it gets any later. You could try to investigate the Monstrous Nightmares after you finish your last scout for the Asura."

"That's what I was planning on," he smirked, gripping her shoulder in goodbye. "Take care, Maka. Tell Black Star not to fret, I'll be back soon."

Maka laughed. "He's anxious for you to fight him again!"

"Anxious for a beating, more like it," Kidd sighed. "I'll be back later."

"Bye, Kidd!" Maka waved, hiking her bag on her shoulder. She made sure he was no longer in sight before she headed out of the mess hall. Only Kidd would have such great timing, Maka smiled, she didn't know how she'd get out of that conversation with her friends. She had just taken some sandwiches when they came up behind her, scaring her witless. They didn't seem to care that she had taken an entire platter, only joked that if she got caught she would get an earful from the chefs. They'd been on the prowl searching for the person who was taking extra food. Maka made sure to be more careful next time.

She wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck. It was a cold day, colder than the others. She hoped Kidd wouldn't freeze to death up in the air before continuing on, taking the forest path instead of the usual path. If they were still scouting, the last thing she needed was to have them spot her. The trees would offer enough coverage from their eyes. She was more than halfway there when she heard a roar in the distance. Maka felt her heart pick up but quickly banished any negative thought.

"I swear, Soul, if you were startled by another rabbit..." Maka muttered under her breath, hurrying to him. For such a fearsome creature, he was easily spooked. It was as if he had never been outside before!

"Soul, what is it thisâ€" \_Soul?"\_ Maka gasped, dropping her bag on the floor when she found two other dragons with their Trainers hounding in on Soul. He was by the boulder he always waited for her at, but there was something different about him. He appeared bigger than usual, \_fiercer\_. This was when she realized just how dangerous he really was. There was webbing on his neck that bristled open in his fury, as pale white as the rest of him. His wings were pointed straight on his back and she realized those sharp hooks at the ends were meant for stabbing, his ears as sharp as the spikes on his tail. She also noticed the row of razor spikes that ran down the curve of his otherwise smooth spine. That had certainly not been there before. She hadn't realized those designs on his back were actually \_weapons\_, spikes that had been folded in until they were needed. His entire body was a weapon, she gulped, each scale retracting to reveal a deadly edge.

"Who are you?" one of the men shouted and she realized it was one of the Meister's from her own village, a Meister who went by the name of Harvar. He was accompanied by an unfamiliar man. He wore rounded spectacles like Stein and he was bald completely, his coat's black collar reaching high up his neck. His armor was also different than their own and she noticed the great metal spear secured on his back belatedly. "Maka? Is that you?"

"Harvar, what in the world are you doing?"

"I should be asking you that! What are you doing here, you're not supposed to be out of the village! Get out of here now! This is dangerous!"

"No, stop! Leave him alone!" Maka shouted, storming forward. One of the dragons, the bald one's, sneered at her to stay away with a warning growl. That had been a mistake. Maka gasped when Soul roared, slamming his tail viciously on the floor and taking a step towards the dragon who'd threatened her. "NO, STOP! STOP IT, LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Maka cried. "SOUL, DON'T!"

Soul hesitated.

"Maka, stay back!" Harvar warned. "He's an Asuraâ€"!"

"HE IS NOT! Are you stupid? ASURAS ARE BLACK AND THEY CAN'T FLY!"

Harvar scowled at her. "I meant he's an Asuras hoard!"

"That's ridiculous! He is not!"

"He might not be, but he is an Unknown," the bald man said before his friend could, ignoring Harvar's look of surprise. "He's equally dangerous as an Asura and needs to be captured, or killed. We were given orders. We intend to follow them."

"Killed?" Maka croaked, sick to her gut at the thought. She narrowed

her eyes and shook her head, steeling her nerves. She needed to be strong, act strong like Stein did when they challenged him. "He never did anything to you! Why would you kill him? Leave him alone, he's not what you're looking for!"

"He's a menace!"

"He's a DRAGON!" Maka snarled, fisting her hands. She was trying to slowly inch her way towards Soul. If she could just get between them, then she could calm everyone down enough to think things through and leave Soul alone. Perhaps she could even buy him enough time to escape although, knowing how stubborn Soul could be at times, she doubted he would be able to let go of a fight. "He's supposed to be a menace, he's a dragon, what else did you expect?"

"She's has a point," Harvar murmured. He tugged on his reigns, moving his dragon back. He did not, however, show any inclination of leaving Soul be. He only prepared for what she knew was an attack. "Perhaps we won't kill him, but we will capture him and bring him back for the Keeper."

"Leave him alone," Maka said one last time, evenly.

"He's an Unknown," Harvar told her just as evenly. "He's more of a menace because we do not know what he is. Back away, Maka, or I will force you to."

Maka purposely stepped forward. "No."

"So be it," Harvar narrowed his eyes and had just moved his dragon towards her, not meaning to hurt her but rather push her back, when the Unknown dragon gave a violent roar and rushed at him unexpectedly. He cursed and just managed to backtrack enough to block a vicious blow from his spiked tail. The spikes were sharper than he realized: his dragon gave a cry of pain when they dug past the natural armor of her back. Before he could attack or before his teammate, Ox, could as well, the white-scaled dragon flew back in a flash and landed beside Maka. His tail retracted the spikes and wrapped around her legs protectively, pressing her against him as he growled at them threateningly.

Maka hadn't known what to expect when he attacked Harvar. She had expected them to brawl until one or the other fell. Mostly, she had been worried about Soul's wound. It was an ugly scar down his belly and it was still tender despite it looking so much better than before. At the very least she was relieved that Soul himself knew he couldn't risk fighting—she could already see pricks of blood from where he had strained the tissue. She pressed a comforting hand against him and turned back to Ox and Harvar, shouting: "Leave him alone! He's not doing anything, he's docile! If you need him that badly, I will take him back to my village," she stressed this, staring at Ox as she said this, "and have our Keeper there observe him. But only me!"

"Ox?" Harvar called, watching his friend analyze the situation silently. "Should we allow her?"

"We don't have much choice," Ox grimaced, looking at the white-scaled dragon. He lowered his voice so Maka would not hear. "He's stronger than the others. His spikes can pierce through armor. If we fight,

we'd need more than just us."

Harvar nodded, aware of his dragons whines and shaking. He placed a hand on the side of her neck to calm her.

Ox reigned his dragon back and held Maka's gaze coolly. "Very well. We'll follow you back. You can lead him back to the village but if he tries to escape or you try to let him escape, we will arrest you for interfering and hunt him down ourselves. I cannot assure he'll come back alive if that happens, either," he sneered at her, the threat clear in his words. His dragon gave a snotty shake of her head as well.

Maka hardened her eyes. "Fine." She softened them when she turned back to Soul, who darted his red eyes down at her when he noticed. She nudged her hand at his tail and he unraveled it from her legs, allowing her to reach for his cheek. "Soul, listen to me. You have to come with me back to my village, you'll be kept in a cave with others while Stein observes you." "no, stop," she admonished when he growled and pulled back. "Listen," she ordered and he flattened his ears, an unamused rumble in his chest. "If you don't, they'll kill you. You can't fight, your wound is still healing. If they land one blow here," she gently pressed a hand over his scar. "You're done. Understand?"

He just looked at her but she had a very good feeling he did understand. She was right when she tugged him along and he followed, retracting some of his spikes as well as his claws. Soul gave one last sneering look at the two who followed behind him. Maka looked up at him and back down in guilt when he caught her glance. He kept very close to her and kept the chilly wind at bay, but she still felt cold. It had nothing to do with the weather. She made sure to take as long as possible although it didn't take long at all to reach the main gate of her village. Harvar had flown ahead sometime during their trek so that by the time she returned, she was met with Stein at the very center of the gate, stone-faced and silent, along with the familiar tools to subdue a dragon held in the hands of guards and Meister's alike. She grimaced at the spears and heavy coils of chains and shackles. She refused to let Soul be put in those.

She stopped before Stein, who looked at her expectantly.

"He won't hurt anyone if I lead him in," Maka told him calmly. She met his eyes bravely. "He will break through those chains if we put them on him. He's different than the others, let me walk him in."

"Very well," Stein acquiesced and ignored the worried looks he received from the rest. He motioned for something and Maka saw it to be a leash, one of the black leather ones usually used for training. She held Soul back when he growled at Stein's approach, managing to take the leash before Soul could nip at the Keeper.

Maka turned back to Soul, holding the loop up to him. "Put it on. C'mon, the faster we do this, the faster you can sleep! You like to sleep, don't you?"

Soul stared at the leash with loathing.

"I know you don't like it, but you have to wear it," Maka told him

and he pulled back when she tried. She growled and jumped, trying to put his head through the loop. She had the brief thought that he bounced back quickly enough if he was playing games with her again. She could feel the purring rumble in his chest when she hung off his neck, trying to fit the noose over his head. "Soul," she growled and he held his head up higher. "Soul, I will hurt you if you do not get in the leash! NOW!" She snapped and he brought his neck back down because he knew better than to rile her up too much, letting her secure it over his neck with a sulky exhale. He jerked his neck back some, not liking how it felt over him, but he followed her when she tugged. She ignored the scrutinizing look Stein gave them as she walked the dragon into her village. They took a wider route, one that led to the Keeper cells, where the dragons were usually kept.

"Not with the rest," Steins spoke up before they reached it. "He has one to himself."

Maka nodded quietly, walking Soul into the separate cage Stein had reserved for him, set away from the common cage. He sat down once inside, the heavy iron doors slamming shut. She made sure to be near him so he didn't panic, but he took it all in with a sort of humanly grace she couldn't begin to describe. It was different and strange. She knew any other dragon would have been in a panicked riot at the sight of bars and shackles, but Soul took it all in stride. She wondered what they would name him, what type he would come to be called and what new things they would discover, when Stein stepped up next to her and said:

"Do you know how much trouble you're in?"

Maka cringed. Her head bowed in shame. "Yesâ€|"

"Your father is on his way."

Maka snapped her head up to him, wide-eyed. "Howâ€|?"

"He heard. The entire village knows by now," Stein looked down at her with disappointment. She hated it. "What did I tell you about going to Gallows Way on your own?"

"â€|Not to, " she sighed, adding quickly, "But nothing happened! I was fine, in fact, I even managed to save this dragon andâ€|"!

"Save this dragon?" Stein interrupted, narrowing his eyes at her. "He was injured? Ah, that explains the wound on his chest."

Maka hesitated, wanting to lie, but exhaled a breath instead. The jig was up; she was caught. There was no way she could lie her way out of this one without getting herself into more trouble. "â€|Yes. I went out to investigate the Asura sightings and found nothing, not even a print. I went to eat and then I found him, bleeding out. I've been going to take care of him for the past two weeks." She winced when he thinned his lips. "But I'm fine! Look, I'm not hurt!"

"That is not the issue, Maka," he told her sternly. "You disobeyed direct orders. You compromised your safety for the sake of an adventure," he gave her a disapproving look. "I expected better of you."

"But I'm fine and he's fine andâ€|"!

"MAKA!"

"Your father is here. I will let him deal with you," Stein coolly said. Maka dropped her eyes to the ground, hurt.

"Papa," Maka softly began, looking up at him as he stormed towards her. She rubbed her shoulder and decided she'd start from the top.  
"Papa, I can explain!"

"Explain how you lied to me and went out to Gallows Way even after I explicitly told you not to! EXPLAIN THAT TO ME!" He shouted. She flinched at his tone, shocked as he had never rose his voice at her like that. The warning rumble that came from the cage went ignored.  
"Do you know how dangerous it is out there right now? You could have been killed, you could have been!"

"But I wasn't!" Maka shouted back, finally raising her eyes to his furious ones. "I'm eighteen, papa, I'm an adult and!"

"You're still a child!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Eighteen does not make you an adult, Maka, your choices do!" He silenced her. She clenched her teeth, angry tears pricking her eyes.  
"And your choices reflect poorly of yourself. I told you not to go out into the forest not to keep you imprisoned here, but to keep you safe. You've never faced an Asura, you would not know what to do in a situation with one, and going out to look for it is the absolute most idiotic thing I've ever heard! Have you learned nothing in your classes?" He shouted, exasperated, and this time she could not hold her tongue back any longer.

"I knew exactly what I was doing and although my choices might seem infantile to you, they're mine and they were important to me! I took the necessary precautions even without having a dragon and YOU can't tell me I did something wrong when I not only brought back an Unknown, but can well say that there is absolutely no trace of an Asura down by Gallows Way! I took that risk when you couldn't," Maka shouted at her father. "I did. Mama would have!"

"Your mother isn't here anymore!"

"And who's fault is that?" She spat, blinking away tears. "Who's is it that she isn't here anymore?! Maybe is she had been, I wouldn't be so reckless," she choked out, years of pent up bitterness and hurt suddenly surfacing.

"Maka," he reached out for her but the dragon in the cage gave a violent roar. Maka gasped and Spirit backpedaled in shock, the Meister's holding up their weapons as Soul slammed into the bars and dented them dangerously.

"Hm," she vaguely heard Stein hum in the background before she ran, holding her hands up at Soul desperately.

"No, Soulâ€"Soul, stop, don't!"

He gave one last lunge at the bars and she shielded herself from the

debris of metal when they gave out. She gasped when he rushed at her and she had just shut her eyes, feeling fear swallow her up, when she felt the softness of his underbelly on her cheek. She opened her watery eyes, looking up to find him encasing her with his wings, curled up to her with his wide chin resting on her shoulder. They were completely covered, she saw with awe, it was like a shelter of armor. She could hear her father shout in panic, could hear the distinct ping, ping of metal hitting against the armor that was his skin. But he did not seem bothered by it and she quietly marveled at how strong his outer skin really was.

Maka sniffled, wiping her cheeks of tears. He gave a grunt and this time she reached over and gave him a hug. He stayed still and she listened to his heavy breathing for a few minutes, until the violence from outside stopped and all she heard was talking and calls of her name. She smiled against his long neck and reached down to poke his squishy tummy. He growled and she giggled.

"You're going to be in so much trouble," Maka sighed when he only nudged her back with his arm. She took this time to really see his wing span and she was surprised to find it nearly encapsulated all of him. He had very big wings, bigger than she thought he would, and apparently they were reinforced if not even spears could pierce through them like the others. Yet it had to be light enough for flight, she wondered just what his wings were made of. Maka patted his shoulder and said, "C'mon, let me out. I have to face them sometime. I won't cry anymore," she smiled at him and, after a few seconds, his wings retracted and folded back up neatly on his back.

Maka turned back to find a small crowd of Meister's, all armed and ready with their dragons. She found it a little ridiculous, actually, how much they worried that Soul would hurt someone. She turned to find Stein the calmest of them all, tapping his finger on his chin thoughtfully while her father wailed in relief and tried to run to her.

Soul bared his teeth at Spirit, wrapping his tail around her legs again.

"Stop," she flicked Soul's cheek and Soul growled at her.

"Do stop, Spirit," Stein called out, mildly amused at the panic he saw on his friend's face. "He deems you a threat. Perhaps you should have saved the scolding for home. Don't try to approach her in his presence, he will kill you," Stein beamed. Spirit whipped his head to the Keeper, horror dawning on his face. "Anyone who comes to threaten Maka will be deemed as an enemy. It's basic, it seems she's managed to tame him." Stein stepped forward and observed the broken cage, the bars which were bent outward and broken. "He's very strong for his age."

"You can tell how old he is?" Maka asked, curiously.

Stein nodded. "He seems to be around sixteen years old, give or take."

"Sixteen?" Maka looked up at Soul in surprise. Clay was only six years old. The oldest dragons, meant for combat, were at least thirty plus years. They were the most experienced and resilient. "He's still

young."

"He's an adult, for the most part," he cast her a lightly amused look at this and she felt her cheeks pink. "His scales are also the hardest I have ever seenâ€"his wing span is peculiar, too, stronger than the others. It's strange, I have only seen this once before," Stein murmured, pacing as he observed Soul. The dragon followed him with his eyes and Maka felt his tail wind around her legs again. She flicked his cheek and he relented. "He might be a human hoarder as well," Stein smirked, having caught the action.

Maka squeaked when Soul purposely nudged her away with his tail, snorting, and she immediately rounded back to him and jabbed a finger into the tender skin of his belly. "What the hell was that supposed to meanâ€"ah!" she yelped when his tail wrapped around her legs and nearly knocked her off her feet. "You damn lizard!"

Soul growled.

"No insulting the dragon, Maka," Stein drawled as he shooed the Meister's away. By this time, Maka saw, the majority of them had left and only Harvar and Ox remained along with two other guards. "He's still dangerous."

"Ha," Maka huffed. "He's about as lethal as a gecko!"

This time Soul did knock her off her feet and, when she smacked him and stormed back to Stein, the amount of time the dragon spent trying to get back into her graces was peculiar and unnatural but certainly something to document. Very attached to their Trainer, Stein had noted to himself, and very protective, a trait found in most older Meister-dragon pairs but it was certainly not restricted to the younger ones.

"Are you going to keep him?" Maka asked, ignoring Soul when he watched her warily from afar. He took small steps towards her, the smart reptile.

"We have no choice," Stein told her with a smile. Spirit tried to approach her, to be apart of the conversation, but one warning rumble from Soul and he stayed in his place helplessly. Maka only shot them both a dark look before returning her attention to Stein. "I doubt that if we let him go or give him away to another, he'll simply leave."

"Give him away to another?" Maka asked, voice small. "But..."

"He's much stronger than the rest, and as such he should be given to a Trainer with more experience," Stein told her logically.

Maka swallowed, fists clenching at her sides. She was about to argue her case when Soul's snout found her hand and nudged it. She looked down at him and her ire settled, warmth softening her eyes as she rubbed his head and let his tail wind around her legs. She heard a low rumble come from his chest and her smile widened, the tip of his tail thumping gently on her thigh.

"But I suppose you can train him," Stein told her and she looked up, eyes bright.

"I-I can keep him?" Maka asked, voice thick with excitement.

"You're ahead in your classes, anyway. It's about time you started your dragon training," Stein smiled. "Although, you will probably have to ask your father for permission as well."

Maka squealed, barely hearing him. She was just relieved she could keep Soul. "\_Yes! \_I'll train extra-hard, Stein, I promise!"

Soul yawned widely and she gagged, shouting something about his horrible dragons breath.

The dragon did it again just for fun, keeping his tail wrapped around her legs so she didn't run from him.

That point was when Stein knew he was the right dragon for Maka.

## 5. Chapter 5

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett</strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em>3 Years Later.</em>

"HYAHHAHA!" Black Star boomed, fastening his hands over the leather straps of his reigns. He could hear the air rush in his ears, feel it against his face with intense heat. The sun glared down at him but he ignored it, far too exhilarated to care about the humid summer heat. "Go for the gold, Mifune! WHOOOOOO!" He swept close to the floor before pulling up and guiding him back into the clear, blue sky.

"This is unacceptable!" someone wailed from down below, the words making the blue-haired warrior grin widely. "What is he doing?"

"Relax, Kid," Maka giggled as she hung back under the shade of a tree and watched her childhood friend wrangle the poor dragon this way and that. "He's just having some fun after training, is all!" Mifune was a majestic creature and, for the longest time, Maka had envied her friend for managing to snag such an elegant and cool-headed dragon. He had soft gray scales that reflected different shades under the rays of the sun and he had the most piercing black eyes she had seen yet on a dragon; dark like a storm to match his broody personality.

Maka would sometimes joke that he rivaled Soul in broodiness although, personally speaking, Soul was much more lively when they were alone. It seemed the problem lied whenever she nudged him closer to the other dragons in the common lair. Soul was uncomfortable with others, isolating himself in the corner of the cage and ignoring the other dragons. Maka had stopped trying to get him to socialize when she saw how miserable it really made him. In the end, she and Stein decided it was just a trait special to his specie. There were some dragons who preferred solidarity than groups, after all.

"No, no, no! Not only is he fooling around, but his flips aren't even \_symmetrical!\_ Does he not see the travesty he is creating!?" Kid gnashed his teeth, clenching his fists. She watched his golden eyes burn with irritation and she looked back at Black Star, seeing nothing wrong with the impressive aerodynamic turns he had taught the dragon to execute. It had saved him quite a few times during battles.

"They look fine to me."

"Well, they're not!" Kid steamed. "He needs to move a few more degrees to the right! He slants to the left too much!"

Maka cocked her head as Mifune executed another fluid flip. She didn't notice a thing; it seemed absolutely perfect to her, impressive even. She couldn't do that with Soul because his wings were far too large; they would lose control if they tried. He was not built for agility like Mifune was: he was built for head-on assaults, his claws made to break through stone.

"I think he's fine," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You think everything he does is fine," Kid mumbled and she arched a disbelieving brow.

"Have you been cooped up in your home so long that you've forgotten just how much Black Star grates on my nerves?"

Kid cracked a smile. "Right, I forget: you prefer men of intellect."

"I prefer," she emphasized, sending him a warning look. She knew where he was getting at and trying to extract information regarding her intimate life was futile, "those with something called common sense."

"Same thing, for us," Kid smirked at her.

"Humph. If Liz heard you, she'd be angry. She doesn't like it when you degrade yourself," Maka giggled when Kid blanched, knowing that his bouts of depression always followed with a good shoulder shake or, worst yet, a punch from his easily-irritable fiancÃ©e. "Oh, there he is! He's back!" Maka whistled when she spotted the great white blotch of her dragon at the very end of the training field. He perked up at the sound and launched off the ground in a blur. Before she knew it, he landed before her in a plume of dust and gravel. His tail wrapped affectionately around her legs right after. "How was the check up with Stein?" She rubbed his snout and grinned when he shook his head in her hand. "That bad, huh? I told you not to eat all of those berries, you gecko," she giggled when he huffed out air and wandered past her, his tail slipping from around her legs as he went.

"It never fails to fascinate me," Kid told her once she was done. She turned to find him with his arms crossed, a quirk of a smile on his handsome face.

"What never does?"

"How you communicate with him, as if he were human," he stated and Maka chanced a glance back at Soul. He was lounging under the shade of a tree to get away from the summer heat. She, herself, was wearing a lot less clothing than usual. Her skirt was rather short on her thighs and although her father paled when he realized his daughter forewent her trousers during the summer, she ignored him. It was easier to fight with a short skirt and riding on her dragon's back didn't bother her as much. She wore shorts underneath; she didn't understand his horror. What hadn't changed was her shirt: it was still sun-beat leather, but more fitted and the laced up front was always tight. She wore her armor a lot less as well, preferring her dragon's protective wings. They were long enough to shield her from any incoming attacks or debris although Kid often scolded her when she went out on missions without her helmet.

"Well, it feels like he does understand me," Maka told him honestly and Kid smiled back. "Don't you feel the same?"

"Those two," Kid grimaced. "If one listens, the other doesn't! It's impossible to tell what they're scheming sometimes!" He looked at his own dragon and found one of the light golden heads grazing on the grass while the other slept soundly beneath the shade of a tree. It was a double-headed dragon, one of the rare ones. As such, she was bigger than Mifune and Soul but Maka found that their bigger size didn't make them any less agile in the air. "If I communicated with them like you communicate with Soul, then perhaps we would get somewhere..."

Maka laughed but she understood what he meant. These past few years with Soul, Maka couldn't help but to feel as if she understood him a lot more intimately than other Trainers their age understood their dragon. She had only just recently been upgraded to Meister but the road to the title had been plagued with doubt about just what type of dragon Soul was. There was something distinctly different about him, how he carried himself and how well he understood what he was being told. Stein had mentioned to her various times throughout the years that Soul understood more than she thought he did. Stein had yet to give him a name; he was still studying him. She often wondered when he would stop, but Soul was always full of surprises.

For example, Stein had recently informed her that Soul had been getting out of cage a lot more often these past few weeks. It was only recently that he had begun to escape his cage and what worried her the most was when Stein told her there was no sign of breaking out: his cage was just empty and he would return at dawn, where Stein was usually waiting for him.

They had had this trouble in the beginning, when they first brought him over, because he disliked being kept in the cage. A fresh batch of meat and, to Stein's amusement, some sandwiches usually kept him in his cage. Eventually, he had grown used to it and sought it out more times than naught. Her dragon was a very lazy one and sometimes she had to really force him out to socialize although the other dragons didn't interact with him much: Soul didn't seem to mind. He liked being close to her. If not for them then for her, she had rationalized. She certainly treasured her time with her dragon.

"What are you up to, Soul?" Maka murmured to herself as she approached him. She saw one of his eyes open then close and he let

his tail curl into his stomach so she did not trip over it on her way to him. She sat down near his neck and leaned against him, his head curving around her to rest on her lap comfortably. She pet his head as Black Star worked Mifune out until his dying breath in the air. She was waiting for the moment when Mifune would buck Black Star off his back and go take a much-needed bath in the stream up ahead. To brood, she giggled quietly to herself, as the elder dragon tended to do.

"Stein says you've been leaving your cage at night. Where've you been going?" She leaned over and he made no move, seemingly asleep but she knew better. She picked at the webbing against his neck, the skin that would spread out in a display of challenge when he was angry. Maka rested her head against him and she would have fallen asleep against him, his deep inhales and exhales lulling her into a nap, had she not heard Black Star crash into the ground near her while Mifune made his way to the streamâ€" just as Maka predicted.

"Are you well, Black Star?"

"M'fine!" He gave a weak thumbs up. He rolled on his back and sat up, rubbing his cheek with a grumble. "Damn bastard of an \_old lizard!\_" He shouted at his dragon, continuing his grumbling when the dragon didn't reappear. "Thinks he's so high and mighty, eh? Feh!"

"He learned from the best," Maka jeered.

Black Star snapped his head to her, pointing a warning finger at her. "Don't be mistaken, Maka, I \_am \_the highest and mightiest!"

"Highest? We're the same height! You're short compared to other men!"

"I AM \_NOT\_â€"!"

"Maka! Black Star" Kid shouted, cutting their bickering in half. "I'm leaving! Would you two like to join me for some dinner at my father's house tonight? It's a celebratory dinner â€" Stein is invited as well!"

"Celebraâ€"oh, right!" Maka remembered. Kid had recently become engaged to Liz; the woman had been gushing about it for weeks! "Of course! I'll be there after sun set!"

"Me, too! Me, too! I want to go! Elizabeth's sister is one of the \_best\_ women I've seen yet!" Black Star shot back up, grinning perversely. "She also has some of the best \_tits\_â€"!"

"BLACK STAR!" Maka screeched. Soul jerked awake, his chest rumbling in annoyance. She ignored him. "Don't talk about her sister like that! It's disgusting!"

"Oh, come off it! Just co\_z you\_ don't have any!"

Kid winced when Maka threw her dagger at the man, who just barely avoided having it embed in his skull.

"You want to repeat that, you moron\_?" Maka slit her eyes. "What I may lack in my chest, I make up for in \_here!\_" She pointed to her

head loftily and Black Star smirked, snatching the dagger off the floor.

"Or down there," he motioned to her thighs and Maka flushed red. One disadvantage of a short skirt: despite her shorts, it was still revealing."

"I will let Soul feast on your bones, Black Star, if you say that to me again," she told him dangerously and he scoffed, waving her threat off.

"You were the one who set yourself up!"

"Dinner is at eight. I hope you both can make it!" Kid dryly shouted at them, waving as he let them bicker it out. Childhood friends they were although Kid knew Black Star had once held a small crush on Maka. It was gone now, but that didn't mean that the man didn't waste an opportunity to try and flirt with her...or any other woman in the vicinity; he really had no boundaries at this point in his life. However, with Maka, it was to no avail; Maka took her oath to remain unattached seriously.

Black Star tossed Maka her dagger back. "I'll see ya' at Kid's place, Maka!"

"If you insult Liz's sister, I'll hurt you, Black Star!"

"I won't," Black Star rolled his eyes. His grin became a little leering when he turned back, though. "But if she comes onto me, who am I to deny her?" He happily went on his way, leaving Maka with her ever-faithful dragon. Honestly, sometimes Black Star thought she would just end up marrying the bloody beast; she was attached to the hip with it. Even he wasn't that attached to his dragon although with good reason: the old lizard hardly batted an eye in his direction most of the time. It irked him to no end! One day, Black Star told himself, he would find a new dragon who didn't always treat him like a child! And Mifune would come crawling back to him, he cackled.

Maka watched Black Star go with a sigh, not at all surprised when he started to laugh out of nowhere. He was probably having ridiculous thoughts again. She wondered why she put up with him; he was nothing but a promiscuous twit but age had made their friendship strong, she supposed.

Kid was better off than Black Star in that respect. Recently, Kid had gotten engaged to one of the warrior girls in their village, Elizabeth, or Liz. It seemed like he would be following the traditional method of marrying and being a Meister on the side. There were many men in the village, however, who had started to forgo becoming Meister's. There had been a bloody battle against an entire fleet of Monstrous Nightmare's two years ago. They had been mistaken about it being an Asura threat; it had been something less dangerous but no less deadly, perhaps deadlier as they had come in a pack. Kid had been right: it had been a hoard of Monstrous Nightmare's and, although that time Maka and Black Star had not been able to fight despite wanting to, Kid had been able to and he had barely returned alive. Many of their men had fallen in that battle. She supposed that was what prompted him to propose to that pretty blonde-haired warrior. Black Star had yet to announce any sort of engagement, but

she sometimes caught him sneaking out with a girlâ€"although, it was a different one each time so she assumed he was more celebrating his youth than anything else.

Maka was proud to say that, at twenty one, she was still gracefully single and not at all wanting to settle down. Her father, and even Stein's motherly wife Marie, often inquired (mostly Marie, her father was more than pleased she wasn't married or thinking about it) if she had gone out with some of the village boys who had apparent crushes on her.

"Ha," Maka snorted. Soul cracked an eye open but closed it right afterward. "As if," she nestled back against her dragon. She'd marry her dragon if she could; the animal understood her much better than any of those stupid boys ever could. Now, if only stayed in his cage and didn't escape to go God-knows-where and as long as she didn't see any white little dragons running aroundâ€!

"You better not be cheating on me, Soul," Maka teased, poking his cheek. He huffed out air, his cheek twitching at the gesture. "With you sneaking out in the middle of the night and all. I don't want to see any white baby dragons out there," she giggled.

Soul snorted and buried his nose in her thigh.

"That's what I thought," she smiled but still hoped the new doors Stein had installed in his cage would keep in him inside.

\* \* \*

><p>They didn't.</p>

Stein couldn't comprehend how he was escaping his cage without breaking the doors. There was no way he would be able to open the lock, his claws were too thick to pick it, and there was absolutely no way he would be able to squeeze past the bars. The doors were not strained in anyway, either, there was no physical sign of it being forced or otherwise. Stein figured someone was letting him out but he had kept watch once and saw no one approach the cage. Yet Soul had mysteriously disappeared from his cage still.

Maka couldn't wrap her head around it either, but she was not as concerned as Stein.

Soul always came back and as long as he came back, she had no problem with him wandering the forest at night. He knew better than to stray too far and he was very familiar with the surrounding area, given how many hours she had invested in training him in these parts. Perhaps he only wanted to go out for air; Soul liked to be surrounded by forest, liked to listen to nature with her. If he wanted more alone time, as long as he was not sad, she was fine with it.

Maka plopped down on the edge of her bed and changed into her night gown, her father already snoring in the room down the hall. She let her hair loose from her ponytail and allowed a content sigh to escape her at how marvelous it felt to just relax and lay down for bed. She wondered if this was how Soul felt at the thought of sleep and giggled, about to settle down for bed when a knock sounded on her door. It was rapid and hard and she though of the worst as she sat up, pulling on her coat to cover herself. She hauled the door and

blinked at the sight that met her, startled silent at the red eyes that stared back at her. They were very vivid red, much like "her \_dragon\_, she thought to herself in surprise, very much like his. His hair was wild and very white, his face handsome despite the stubble. He was a tall man and she noticed he was dressed in only pants two sizes too small for him and a buttoned up vest familiar to Black Star's. He was barefoot and before she could take anymore of him in, he spoke:

"Maka...I'm stuck and Stein is being strange again," he gulped, voice a rumbling baritone. She almost did not understand him; his accent was strange, the words forced.

Maka frowned, setting her hand on her hip. "Excuse me, but who are you and how do you know my name?"

He gave her a surprised look. "Wha'?"

"Oh, I know! You must one of papa's friends! Well, you can't stay here tonight, no matter what papa told you! Go home," she sneered and slammed the door in his face. That had been more than strange. She stood by it for a few seconds, shaking herself of her wild thoughts, and was about to walk back when he knocked again and knocked \_louder\_ this time. She had been bent on ignoring it when her father's snoring hiccuped. She ripped the door open and hissed, "\_Go away!\_ You've obviously had too much to drink and we have no room for!"

"Maka? What are you talking about?" He hissed. The accent in his words became more noticeable, something harsh and foreign. She couldn't pinpoint from exactly where. "It's \_me!\_"

"I don't \_know\_ you! I've never seen you in my life!"

He frowned even deeper and this time she felt an unnerving sense of familiarity at the look in his eye. She couldn't help but feel as if she had known him for a long, long time. "It's me, Soul! Wha', you can't recognize your own dragon?"

Her mouth was open, she knew it was, but she didn't bother to shut it. "Myâ€"my \_dragon\_ is in the Keeper's cell and he's very much \_not human\_," she told him with growing fury. "I don't know who set you up for this, but you are obviouslyâ€"!"

"I'm Soul!"

"Soul is a \_dragon!\_"

"Iâ€|look at my eyes," he met hers straight-on and she couldn't deny the familiar dye of his eyes. They were a particular shade, a murky red that could not be mimicked. "\_I \_\_am\_\_ Soul\_. "

Her hand gripped the door frame and she took a step back, shaking her head. "A-anyone could have red eyes. It's not common, but it's possible!"

"Dammit, \_look!\_" He opened the vest and she'd flushed red and told him to \_stop stripping \_when she was met with a \_very\_ familiar scar down his chest. She dropped her hands from the door frame, letting them fall limp down her sides as she stared at the scar. It was the \_same\_, exactly the same if not smaller, running down his chest down

to his hip. Ugly, hurtful, and a bittersweet reminder of how they had met. She looked up at him and he met her eyes apprehensively. "It's me. I'm Soul. I'm justâ€"different, right now, because I can't change back."

"Change backâ€| into a dragon?"

"Yes."

"Iâ€|what?" Maka stepped back and allowed him in, closing the door. She looked at him and couldn't help but to notice how his head jerked to every noise or smell in the house, how he stood uncertainly amongst it all. She motioned him to the table and she sat down in a chair as he did. He did it much more carefully, however, his attention still on the strange new scents in her home. "Howâ€"how is that even possible? You're a \_dragon\_! Dragons can't change into humans, they're \_dragons!"\_

"Tha's bec'use my kind is differentâ€"we hail from the mountains of Grimm," he told her and she tried to piece together just what he was telling her. She had heard of those mountains in rumors and they were, according to what she had heard, unreachable due to the sheer amount of dragons that inhabited the surrounding area. To try and enter was suicide. There were other villages who were much more dedicated to trying and clear past the sheer quantity of dragons than they were. She looked back up when Soul placed his hands on the table, tapping his fingers on the wood. "We are both human and dragon. We are differ'nt than the rest, superior to them. Why do you think none challenge me? They kno' better," he scoffed and she pressed her lips together.

"So you mean to tell me that this \_entire time \_you've been human and you never bothered to \_tell\_ me?" She growled out and he tensed, looking at her with panic.

"No! No, don't get me wrong, I 'ave only been able to do this fo' a few weeks!" He told her quickly. "I..I didn't tell you bec'use I was practicing," he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Practicing?! Practicing for \_what?\_ What could be so important that you had to keep this from me and go \_practice?" \_

"I wan'ed you to see when I could hold my form..." he mumbled and she felt some of her ire leave her at his deflated tone. He had wanted to impress her, silly reptile. "But now I can't change back and I didn't want to show Stein so I followed you here."

"Did you overexert yourself?"

Soul grunted. "Yeah."

"Youâ€|you stupid reptile. How many times have I told you not to overwork yourself?" She sighed but there was fondness in her tone. He looked up at her, quirked a grin and she saw razor sharp teeth instead of the expected normal set of human teeth. "We have to go tell Stein," she told him suddenly, standing up. "I think this is the final piece of the puzzle! He's been trying to figure out what made you so special from the rest! This is it!"

Soul grimaced and she could almost imagine the exact same look on her

dragon's faceâ€"no, his \_face\_, his face, just when he was a dragon. They were one in the same. They were the \_same\_. Maka held her head and rested a hand on the edge of the table, trying to look past her incredulity of it all. Her dragon was a human, a special type of dragon, which would explain his intelligence and how it felt as if he were listening to her and oh, the things she had told him! Maka felt her face heat up from all the embarrassing things she had confessed to this animal who was not an animal but actually a human-anime hybrid. She was about to shrivel up into a groaning, mortified, mess when his hand reached out and touched her cheek, caressing it like she did him.

"Wha's wrong?" He asked her, his voice a familiar rumble that vibrated in her chest.

"D-DON'T DO THAT!" Maka gasped, slapping his hand away. "Do that to me again and I will axe your hand off!"

He recoiled and she immediately felt bad when she read the hurt on his face.

"Noâ€|I-I mean, that's not what normal humans do to each other," she stammered. She steeled her voice, hardened her eyes. She could not be soft to him just because he was her dragon. He needed to know his boundaries, she told herself. It would be different now. "It's not appropriate! Don't do that again!"

"You do it to me all the time!"

"When you were a dragon!"

"Wha's the difference?"

"You're not a dragon anymore!"

"Is tha' it?"

"\_Yes!"\_

He scowled and glared at the table, broodingly. "I hate it. Why is tha' so impor'ant to you? Wha's it matter? I don't understand."

Maka parted her lips to tell him but instead found she couldn't. There was no difference; he was still her dragon, but how could she tell him such human gestures were meant for lovers and not companions? If he didn't understand that, then she'd have to explain the entire concept of relationships and intimacies and she doubted she'd be able to get through that without slowly shrinking in her seat from the embarrassment of it all.

Instead, another question was brought up:

"Waitâ€|how, is it you can talk?" Maka eyed him. "If you've been able to change only for a few weeks? There is no way you would be able to pick up our language in so little time!"

This time Soul looked at her as if she were a moron. She flushed at the look. "You taught me," he told her bluntly.

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did!"

"No, I didn't!"

"You talked to me all the time, I learned from you!" He told her and she quieted, looking at him in surprise. "You taught me, just like you taught me everything I kno' 'bout humans!"

"That might not be a good thing," Maka told him slowly, knowing she was a lot more cynical than most, but he snorted in reply.

"I listen to others as well and I can make my own decision based on wha' I hear," he shrugged at her. "M'not a moron, Maka."

"I never said you wereâ€|"

"You're looking at me like one, like when you look at Black Star."

"\_No\_, I'm looking at you like a dragon who has magically become a \_human\_!" Maka told him honestly and held her head in both her hands. "Ohâ€|" She groaned and let her forehead slump on the table. "Stein isn't going to believe thisâ€|"

Soul took this chance to look around and see the nest where Maka spent her nights in. He had never seen it before and he had always been curious. It was smaller than he imagined it would be, but no less cozy. It was warm and quaint and he smelled the concentration of her flowery scent from the tiny cot pushed towards the end of the room. It was by the fireplace, which was empty of flames or wood, and he had been about to ask what the things by it were when she lifted her head up and suddenly shouted:

"You can't stay here!"

"Why?"

"Papa will \_kill\_ you if he finds you hereâ€"c'mon, we're going to Stein's house right now!" Maka told him, running over to her bed. She was about to take off her coat when she sensed him behind her. He had followed her, scowling deeply at the thought of seeing Stein in his other form. He would probably want to open him up; he was a very strange man.

"Turn around!" Maka suddenly told him, distracting him.

"Why?"

"I'm going to change!"

"Do it," he deadpanned.

"I can't when you're looking!"

He still didn't move. "How come being human changes this? You've changed in front of me before!"

"When you were a \_dragon!\_" She whined, red tinting her cheeks. She'd stripped \_naked\_ in front of him before, that one time they went to

the river and she wanted to wipe away all the grime and mud off her body. He had been swimming in the water and she had joined him eventually. They spent quite some time simply lounging in the riverbed; at times, she humored him and played along with his water games. She felt her face reach a whole new shade of red at the thought. "Things are different when you're a dragon, Soul, you're a \_man\_ now!"

"Wha's the difference?"

"When you're a dragon, it's fine, because you're an animal and, according to that thought process, you cannot \_cognate \_more thanâ€|well, an animal! But when you're a human, a man, it's different. I'm a \_wo\_man," Maka stressed and looked at him awkwardly. A flash of understanding lit his up eyes and he stood straighter, giving her an amused look that did \_not\_ settle well with her. She knew that look; he understood what she meant, about the difference between man and woman, but he was being stubborn again. No, she thought, looking at his smirk, he was being \_a tease. \_Maka swallowed; her dragon spent a lot of time with Black Star, who knows what that idiot had blabbed on about?

Her face warmed a little more at the thought but she shook it off enough to bark at him: "The only time a man is allowed to see a woman naked is when they're engaged!"

"We're engaged?" He perked up, the word ringing a bell. He believed that Kid was "engaged" to a woman.

"\_No\_," she choked, paling several shades, and he looked visibly put out by it.

"But I've seen you naked beforeâ€"!" Soul dodged a shoe and its twin and glared at Maka when she told him to \_shut up. \_He growled, the sound distinctly inhuman. The evidence only continued to pile up, she thought hopelessly. "\_You\_ saidâ€"!"

"I \_know\_ what I said but we're not! Being in a relationship means being in love andâ€"andâ€"!"

"But I \_do\_ love you," he told her honestly and she was stricken by the honesty she saw in his eyes. "You're my master, Maka. Why wouldn't I?"

Maka worked her mouth around words that refused to come out, caught in her throat because the sheer truth in his eyes made her stomach twist and her heart stutter. She was only becoming more aware of his humanness, of his sudden attractiveness, and this simply could not be. There was a hierarchy of power, she told herself, they were partners and not something \_more. \_"It'sâ€|you'll see soon," she quietly said, looking away from him. "You'll see how it's different, Soul."

He furrowed his brow but said nothing more, turning around when she asked again. Once she was changed, he followed her outside and to Stein's humble home, where the Keeper triumphantly said that one of his many outrageous but now not-so-outrageous theories had \_finally\_ seen the light.

"Don't touch me," Soul growled when he drew too close and Stein

smirked, tapping a finger on his chin.

"Easily frightened, I see."

"Whâ€"! I am not! I just don't want you to come near me, you sadist!"

"Soul, relax. Let him do what he needs to do," Maka cut in calmly, looking away from the parchment Stein had given her. It was a detailed run-down of all the things he had observed from Soul, which gave her a better idea of just how this entire mess started.

Soul gave her a nauseous look. "You'd let 'em open me up? The hell, Maka, is this because I'm human now, too?"

"Open?" Stein perked up at the suggestion but was quickly brought back down by one glare from Maka.

Certainly, Maka thought with a sigh, this would be a long week.

## 6. Chapter 6

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett</strong>

This was not how Maka expected things to go.

Summer had long past, the season wrought with not the usual rigorous training Maka expected. Instead, it was filled with Soul getting a grasp of his new human surroundings. His grasp on their language had improved, with his words sounding sharper and clearer. He had packed on some muscle from the training they did together, other times with Black Star, and he was seemingly adapting to a human life style well. But therein lied the problem, as she stared at her ceiling and wondered if wishing so hard for a dragon like Soul when she was younger had been a good idea.

She laid in bed, wide-eyed with her hands clutching her sheets to her chest. She spared a glance to her right and her eyes dropped down to the absent bundle of blankets and pillows. She hated to admit it, but she actually missed the big goof, snoring and causing havoc with the wool blankets she loaned him. He had actually shredded three of them. She had returned to her small bed hours after loaning them to him to find the blankets ripped horrifically, Soul snuggled in the middle of it innocently. She had nearly kicked him out that time; those blankets were expensive and extremely helpful during bitter winters, yet he had completely shred them with his god-forbidden talons of hands for nesting material.

She had forgotten dragons had a tendency for thatâ€"bundling up in their bedding, burying themselves beneath piles and piles of stuff for the night. Soul had the audacity to even look offended when she called him out on it! Stein had managed to calm her enough when she went to complain to him and she had been reminded numerous times of the perfectly normal habits dragons had which would, inevitably, come with Soul until he learned proper human mannerism.

Maka guessed she should not have made such a huge deal about it: now, Soul was spending his nights with Black Star and his evenings with

Stein training his dragon-human and human-dragon transformations since Maka had insisted they train Soul physically before anything else. To build up his stamina, she had told Stein, so he could better handle the taxing transformations—especially during assignments. As a result, she hadn't seen much of the dragon these past few weeks and she found she missed him a lot more than she thought she would. She would always find him when she was lonely, but now she didn't even have that. Although Soul becoming human had been mystifying and extremely exciting (especially for the eager Keeper), a part of Maka hated that he was human now. Soul was a beacon for attention without anyone knowing of his transformations and often times, for example only a few hours ago, he was surrounded by \_someone. \_Be it one of the Meister's or Trainers or a village girl or boy, Maka hadn't the spirit to walk up to him when he needed as much human interaction as possible.

Stein had told her that allowing Soul to be on his own for these next few weeks would be crucial for his social development. She couldn't keep him by her side all the time, she understood that, but it still made her sour thinking about it. The Keeper had taken to making Soul his own little experiment and it did not help that Black Star had eavesdropped on their conversation and discovered of his transformation as well, taking even \_more \_of her dragons time. Stein and her papa had only allowed him to be in on their little secret because it made the fictional story of Soul being found wandering the outskirts of their village more believable. Her dragon's \_uniqueness was to kept an absolute secret for reasons that included avoiding possible kidnapping and assassination, among other things.

"Goodnight, Maka!"

Maka shifted, watching her papa yawn loudly and shuffle into his room. "...Goodnight, papa."

She didn't need to look to know her father was beaming at her. Maka sunk a little deeper in her bed, a prominent scowl marring her pretty face. To think she had resorted to actually \_communicating with her papa to reach her queue for social interaction! She usually found her dragon when she felt the need to talk or simply be with someone, but now she didn't have that. Black Star had taken up that slot and she was resentful to know that the idiot Meister would probably end up teaching Soul nothing good.

\_Calm down. It's like Soul said: he can think for himself. He's not stupid, \_Maka coached herself. \_In fact, Black Star can probably teach him the difference between companion love and intimate love, \_she sunk deeper into her sheets, glaring at the wall. If there was one thing Black Star was good at, it was getting under a woman's skirts. Was it so bad that she loathed the thought of sharing Soul? When she trained with him as a man during the summer, he still felt like \_hers, like it was \_her dragon she was coaching and encouraging and scolding. Soul was \_her \_dragon; he had been \_hers \_to train and feed and bathe and keep company all these years. But now everyone wanted their share of him and a rock always settled in her chest when she thought about what he would do now that he was a man. Given, he had always been a man, at least partly, but now he had fully transformed into one and he could very well lead the \_life \_of a man. Suddenly, Maka was not so much worried about a woman stealing him away than of him liking this \_human life more than the life of a

warrior.

He had been happy when they trained together, they had both been content with each other, and his teasing had grown worse now that he had a voice. No more were the times where his tail would wrap around her and trip her up, now there were words; banter, arguments, debates, something she found she enjoyed so much she had come to anticipate them. But the times she had glimpsed him around the village these past few weeks, he had been happy as well. He seemed to get along splendidly with Black Star and, although Stein still made him growl, he had grown used to the Keepers strange habits and mutterings. Soul seemed content amongst her own, too; perhaps even more than around her?

He won't leave me, Maka told herself stubbornly. But her face still fell sadly and her chest still felt heavy. There were not many people who would take the dangerous life of a dragon over a human one. Soul would be exposed to all of these new things, new sensations and experiences, and he would also learn the grave dangers of being a Meister; or, in his case, of being the weapon to a Meister. He would have an option now because nothing less would be fair: to stay her dragon or to live among them as a man. Was that how it worked? Maka couldn't fathom. What if Soul really did just live as a human would? What if he got sick of her rigorous training schedule and finally did something about it? What if he got sick of her and her constant nag to get stronger, better, faster?

What if he wanted to go solo?

Suddenly, Maka didn't know her dragon as well as she thought she did.

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><p>The next day was spent as the previous few days had been spent: with Maka lounging in her home, immersing herself in literature or going over the various assignments her father had yet to release to the others. She had found a few that she was interested in, but she always soured when she remembered that she would need a <em>dragon <em>for it. Her sour mood had been off-set when a knock sounded on her door and she opened it to reveal Akane, a local guard.

"Akane?" Maka said, surprised. "Good morning. What brings you here?"

"Oh, a rumor or two, but mainly Stein."

"Rumor? About me?"

"Strange, ain't it?" He smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. "The Chief's daughter topping the rumor mill nowadays. I heard you've been without yer precious dragon," he added, upon catching her irked look. She knew of his brutish ways, as she often spoke to Akane on her way to the training grounds. She would say she had become good friends with the saucy guard, but he still liked to test her patience. He pushed his helmet up his head enough to speak to her properly, "Stein asked me to come get you so you can care for some of the infant dragons with Kim."

"Pardon? He wants me to what, care for a hoard of dragon infants?"

I don't know the first thing in taking care of an infant!" Maka argued. Infant dragons were generally harmless unless you counted their very sharp talons. Maka had seen firsthand just how painful it could be, for both the victim and the baby, to remove said talons from skin, especially when the infant knew nothing outside of eating and sleeping.

"Always time to learn," Akane smiled crookedly. Maka puffed and looked away, miffed. "Well, think about it this way, \_someone's\_ gotta' feed 'em!"

"This is ridiculous..."

"Go on and get yer coat," Akane nodded inside. "Stein said I could drag you out if I had to."

"Urgh. I don't understand why Stein needs \_me\_ of all people! Kim has taken care of dozens on her own before," Maka grumbled as she snatched her coat off her bed, following him out nonetheless. She made sure her coat was on snugly before she walked further out into the snow-washed land.

"Bitter this morning, isn't it?" Akane said, softly. He held out a hand, watching snow flakes melt into the warmth of his palm.

Maka copied him, fisting her hand soon after and blowing hot air into it. "Mm. Hopefully this winter is not as bitter as the last."

"Rumor has it it will be worse."

"You like rumors, don't you?"

Akane shot her a cheeky look. "When you're out there from dawn to nightfall, rumors become much more interesting than watching the leaves crumble with the cold."

Maka rolled her eyes at his reason and let her sights travel through the busy village roads, seeking out a head of pure white, but was disappointed when she didn't catch even a glimpse of Soul through her trek to the keepers cages. She was even more disappointed when she realized she hadn't a clue where he was; training with Black Star? Hanging out with the warriors he'd made friends of? She didn't know and it saddened her. She managed to snap herself out of her gloom when they arrived to the keeper cages.

Akane hollered out to Kim once he was in earshot.

"Akane, there you are! Oh, Maka, you came, too!" Kim beamed, tugging off thick leather gloves. Maka noticed her apron had milk stains on it and stifled a sigh. "It's been such a long time since I've seen you around here! Stein sent Soul out on another scout mission, I hear?"

It took Maka a few seconds to remember that Kim knew nothing about how the new man in the village was actually her dragon. "Oh, yes. Yes, he sent him out \_far\_ away! Really far! He'll be back in...a few days, maybe even weeks," Maka mumbled, fumbling with her chest armor while Akane and Kim exchanged wary looks.

"Well, hopefully he comes back soon. You've been lookin' a little sad

recently," Kim smiled sympathetically. Maka grimaced but didn't comment. "Anyway, I've got some infants you can look after! You can go, Akane! I'll handle it from here."

"Kicking me out already? I wanted a few more minutes to enjoy your lovely company," Akane smirked and Kim smiled saucily, raising a brow at him.

"You can enjoy my company at a later time."

"You said it, not me!" Akane held his hands out with a grin and walked off with a chuckle, leaving Kim giggling and Maka sighing at their blatant flirting.

"What about Ox, Kim?"

Kim immediately soured, wiping her hands on the apron primly as she marched back inside. Maka followed closely behind her. "Ox! Ha! That fool, thinking I'd accept his proposal for marriage! How many times must I reject him before he understands he won't ever have me?"

"I don't know, how many times has he proposed to you thus far?"

"I've lost count, surprisingly," Kim muttered, handing her some elbow-length gloves and an apron. "He really should stop; he's not even from this village. He should go find himself a good woman in his own home! Here, put this on! It'll keep the milk from spraying on you and these will keep your arms safe!"

Maka slipped on the gloves first. "Milk?"

"The infants like to have fun sometimes and spit the milk back at you," Kim explained casually. She slipped on her own gloves and smiled. "The Juggernauts are really fond of that, but they're the calmest out of the hoard so I will give you the youngest twins to take care of while I feed the others!"

"Twins?" Maka inquired as she followed, peering over Kim to find a giant nesting area. It was filled with them, Maka saw with awe, little baby dragons that were no taller than her knee. The tiniest ones were kept in the middle, huddled together like a flock of birds, and the bigger ones stayed on the sides, roughhousing and releasing the cutest little noises that ranged from squeals to grunts to very high roars.

"They're so..."

Kim looked at her, hesitantly. She didn't speak to Maka much but, from what she knew, she was very stern and no-nonsense...

"They're so cute!" Maka squealed, eyes bright.  
><em>

Kim beamed. Stern or not, baby dragons always managed to break down even the toughest mans walls!

"Aren't they? They are the most adorable little things in the worldâ€"yes you are, little babbyyy!" Kim cooed, picking up one of the bigger dragons from the pile. Maka smiled happily as she baby

babbled to the little dragon...at least until it \_snorted\_ and a \_plume of fire\_ escaped its snout. Maka stared in horror as Kim giggled and bopped its upturned nose with hers.

"K-\_Kim!"\_

"What?" She asked, ignoring the second flare of fire the baby burped out.

"A-are you sure that's safe? He just blew out fire!"

"Oh, yes, it's safe! Their fire isn't that hot right now, it doesn't hurt at all!" Kim assured her although Maka still had her doubts. Kim opened the pen for Maka and gently nudged some infants out of her path. Maka squeezed past her, unsure of what to expect after that display, and Kim quickly shut the door, ensuring the lock was in place. "Be very careful when you come out of here, Maka. Sometimes the lock jams. We would not want to have any baby dragons running around these parts, now, would we? The poor things would be hunted. Their skin isn't thick enough to brave the cold, either!"

"Hunted by our men or by their own?" Maka asked softly, nudging an infant out of her way gently. It looked up at her with round, black eyes and \_squee'd\_, a sound that made Maka smile the tiniest bit.

Kim looked down at the infant as well, smile soft but sad. "A little of both, I suppose. We can't blame them too much," she knelt and poked one of the infants bulbous cheeks, earning herself a hiss. Kim smiled gently but her eyes showed sadness. "They're only protecting us from them. Not all of them are as docile as the ones we have here, some of them really \_do\_ search out for human flesh to eat."

Maka grimaced but didn't comment further. The first time she saw a Flesh-Eating Mammoth live up to its name, she had doubled-over and emptied the contents of her stomach after the fight. She remembered Soul nudging his snout into her side, how he let her lean against him as she controlled her shaking hands, tried to forget the mountain of half-eaten corpses the beast had been lounging on before she arrived. It was one of the first missions they had taken together, and one of the ones that had hardened her into the warrior she was now.

"Feeding is easy," Kim told her as she handed her a skin full of milk. "Just grab a baby," she picked one up randomly, ignoring their growl. "Take the skin, fold the opening over a bit, and let them bite it. Be careful here, sometimes they like to take fingers with them," she warned, the baby satisfied now that it had something to suckle on. "Easy, right?"

"M...Mm," Maka nodded, rubbing her arm with her hand, unsure.

"I bet you'll do just fine, Maka!" Kim beamed. "C'mon, let's feed them before they get grouchy!"

The infant Juggernauts were calmer compared to the others in the nest, some of which were screeching and trying to climb up the rock walls. Maka sat on the stool by the edge, watching the majority of the dragons flock to Kim immediately when she took seat on the opposite side. The twins stayed near her and Maka was quick to feed

one of them before they tried to join the others. Feeding was a strange experience for Maka; it was maternal, made her feel strange all around. But she found she rather liked it, the warm feelings of cradling a creature who would one day grow up to save lives, villages. She fed the more rambunctious twin first before placing him back on the floor, picking up the calmer one so he could suckle out of the open edge of a long skin flask. The wilder twin ran circles around Maka in the meantime, no longer wanting Kim, nibbling on the straps of her boots or playing games with the pleats of her skirt, swiping at it and releasing little grunts whenever Maka nudged back.

"Are you holding out alright?" Kim shouted eventually, smiling when Maka nodded back. She was a natural at it; she didn't understand why Maka insisted she was bad with infants. Dragon or otherwise.

Sometime between placing the more docile twin down and taking the wild one to feed it again, another dragon had made their way towards her. She hadn't noticed until the dragon picked at the loose strap of her boot, bowing away when Maka looked. The docile twin sat drowsily by her leg, using it as a sleeping post, but this new dragon gazed up at her with shining purple eyes and tiny pricks of teeth just visible from its parted mouth.

"Hello, there," Maka smiled in welcome. "What are you doing over here? Huh? Shouldn't you be with Kim?"

It gurgled in reply, a sound that squeezed out an endeared laugh from Maka. She looked up to find Kim no longer at the stool caring for the dozen of other dragons, but outside of the nesting cage. Maka could just see her busying herself with, she believed, new skins in order to feed the remaining dragons. Maka, herself, had almost run out of milk.

"Have you eaten yet, little one?" Maka asked, smiling when it squawked. It swatted her boot with its weak wing and jumped back, swatting it again with the underdeveloped ball on its tail this time. The ball would come to have spikes, Maka knew. Right now, they were only harmless nubs of bone. "Hey, wake up," Maka gently nudged the more docile twin. "Come on, I need to..." She felt a bite on her finger and she looked down to find the wild twin gnawing on the glove, jerking his head left and right in an action similar to the tearing of flesh. Barely a few months old and already a predator, Maka dryly thought. She plucked her finger from its mouth and replaced it with the skin, watching the baby suckle viciously for milk. She shuddered at the thought of what its mother would have had to face if she were still alive.

The majority of the infants in the nesting cages had either been abandoned because their mother had passed away during the harsh winter or taken on purpose. They hardly had more than a dozen orphans at a time, but Maka noticed a steady increase and worried at the number, since she knew their men hadn't purposely taken baby dragons recently. It wasn't a natural occurrence, but last winter had been one of the coldest to date...

"I'll get you some milk if you want," Maka told the playful dragon, who squawked again and tried to get her to play by swatting its tail at her boot. She removed the skin from the Juggernaut and offered it

to the playful dragon, who sniffed it before going back to swatting its tail at her. "Not hungry, I guess," Maka murmured to herself and blinked when the Juggernaut snapped his jaw at the skin and continued to drink its milk happily. "Gee, you're really hungry, or are you just being a glutton?" Maka eyed the vicious Juggernaut, who ignored her and continued to suckle on the skin. "You kind of remind of Soul," she quirked a smile. "He always ate, even when he wasn't hungry...I wonder if he's eaten yet," she murmured, worried. "I should have sent a sandwich with Black Star..."

"Makaaaa!"

"Yes?" Maka jumped.

"I have a new skin set up for you and you can feed those who are still hungry!"

"Ah, you...you mean you've fed all of them already?" she asked, astounded.

"There is a \_reason\_ I bring in five skins," Kim winked at her.

"Oh. Well, I think I'm done! This one just wants to play and the other Juggernaut is asleep. It's only this guy here that keeps eating."

Kim snorted when she peered at the dragon Maka cradled in her arms. "Oh, \_him!\_ Once the skin is empty, don't feed him anymore! He'll just keep eating and make himself ill!" Kim gathered up some supplies from the table. "I must deliver these scrap metals to Sid, some of the guards have outgrown their armor and require a fitting. I will return soon, but if you finish feeding the Juggernaut before I do, you can leave. Just make sure the latch on the door is secure," she reminded and Maka watched her leave before turning her attention to the baby dragons who'd gone out of their comfort zone to greet her.

She didn't stay long, only long enough to finish feeding the ravenous Juggernaut. Once sated, it was a lot more amiable towards her; he even let her touch the paper-thin webbing of his wings. Not for long, however, it was quick to nip at her when she got too carried away. Maka forgot that these dragons were different than her own. These were \_real\_ dragons, not hybrids, and certain actions didn't sit well with them like they did with Soul. The thought made her chest feel heavy again; if she ever had to get a new dragon, she knew they would never compare to Soul. He might not have been her first dragon, but he was the absolute best one she had ever had the honor of training.

"You guys are so cute," Maka whispered, petting one of the infants. "I wonder if Soul looked like this, too...hehe," she giggled at the thought of Soul leaping around helplessly when he was a baby. She wondered if he was born dragon, or human? How did that work? She'd have to ask him when she saw him againâ€"but the thought made her heart fall. If she \_ever\_ saw him again, he seemed to be having a riot with the others...

"I shouldn't feel so bad," Maka told the more docile Juggernaut, letting her hand run down his scaly back. He was so tiny; she could feel his bones through his skin. One day, she would not be able to

feel anything but rock. "He's a dragon, but he's a human, too. I should let him be himself and...make friends, I can't be his only friend." She quirked a smile when the baby cocked his head at her. "I still want him near me, though, like during the summer. It's funny, he was so used to being a dragon that one day he forgot how much smaller he is as a human and he knocked his head on a tree!" Maka laughed, remembering that day too well. He usually slumped back against the bark of trees after training but, tired as he was, he had misjudged the distance and ended up crashing his head against the tree instead. "He's such an idiot...stupid reptile," she murmured fondly. When she looked back up to the baby, she found no sign that he had heard her; in fact, he was picking at her chest armor, looking at his reflection with fascination.

"That's right," her eyes saddened, "you don't understand, do you?"

The infant sniffed her armor and nipped at it, squalling when he hurt himself.

"Don't do that, you'll hurt yourself." She stood up, placing the baby back on the softly insulated ground.

"Stay there," Maka told them sternly, fumbling with the latch on the door. "I have to go, Kim will be back soon...no, stay," Maka nudged the more vicious Juggernaut out of the way with a warning look. The others watched curiously. "Stay!" Maka cursed when more started to crawl closer to her, curious of the outside and, in her distraction, the Juggernaut screeched and leaped, an awkward motion that managed to get him past her. She nearly fell over in her attempt not to squash the baby, the last thing she needed was to explain to Kim that she accidentally fell on him, but managed to grab hold of one of its wings before he got away. At his pained screech, she let go, and cursed when he made an even more erratic attempt at escaping. He flew into a table, knocking over cans and manuscripts, his talons leaving shallow marks on the wood. Maka slammed the door to the nesting cage shut, locking it, and chased after the panicked baby. "Wait, stop! Don't go outside! Dammit, come back!"

Maka managed to grab his tail and clutch him to her chest, but one panicked flap of his wings and she let him go, saving herself a vicious slap to the face. For a baby, he could still pack quite a punch.

"Oh, no," Maka panted, staring at the baby who flapped out into the open, trying to pick up enough speed to fly. He only glided a few feet over the snow before he plummeted into it, disappearing from her sight. "Oh, shit."

Maka snapped out of her trance and ran after him, cursing herself for trusting a bloody dragonâ€"a baby, to be fair! She should have known better; these dragons were not like Soul! They didn't listen to her, didn't have to! They scarcely understood what they were being told, much less if they were infants. What did she think, it would be the same? She knew it wouldn't. Soul was special, he was not like the others, why did she think they would actually listen to her?

"Dammit," Maka cursed, looking around for the infant. She couldn't see it; it was all white and the baby had no doubt sunk into the

snow. She needed to find him before the snow covered up his tracks, as it was already doing. She could almost hear Kim, her frantic shout of \_his skin is too thin to bear the snow. \_Maka backtracked and headed toward the nesting cage again, looking for anything that might help her track a baby dragon. She was just about to run out and find Kim when she caught sight of the curious babies that hung around the fenced door. The docile Juggernaut was making pitched squeaks, little cries as it tried to push through the door. \_Twins, \_Maka remembered. \_They're siblings. He just might....

It was worth a shot.

Maka grabbed one of the chain leashes. She was careful this time, opening the door enough for her to squeeze inside. She knelt and secured the collar on the babies neck, trying not to let its cries get the better of her. Once secured, she carefully backtracked and had been about to leave when the other infant clung onto her leg, scaling it expertly until it hung off her chest.

"No, get off! I have to find his brother, dammit! Get! Off!" Maka tried peeling him off but he clung on tightly, growling when she tried harder. After a second, she sighed, and squeezed back out, quickly strapping an arm over the baby in case he tried to escape, too. Surprisingly, the baby stayed latched onto her chest, a slight purr coming from his throat. Maka collared the infant as well, expecting a fight, but it only settled on her chest sleepily.

"Sleeping at a time like this?" She groaned. Such a Soul move, she sighed to herself.

Maka was torn from her thoughts when the baby Juggernaut crawled down the same way his brother went. She followed with a growing smile, hoping that he would be able to track his brother down.

Juggernauts had a keen sense of smell and, judging by his cries and squeals, he missed his brother and knew where he was hiding at.

"I hope he's okay," Maka hurried. She was being led towards the forest, she noticed, not the village. Maka's heart sank at the thought of the infant venturing too far into the forest. He would never be able to survive on his own; he was domesticated, there was no way he would be able to fend for himself. She suddenly wished Soul was thereâ€"no, she wished she had never agreed to feed some baby dragons! If she hadn't, this would have never happened! She would be home, reading a book, not frantically searching for a baby dragon who could possibly freeze to death because of her negligence!

The twin squawked, flapping his wings and growling lowly at the snow he waddled through. After a second, Maka picked him up, shushing him when he hissed and tried to wiggle free. The one that clung onto her chest hissed in reply and quickly crawled onto her back.

"Shit, don't you dare leave me, too!" Maka snapped, but the baby only clung onto her back, peering over her shoulder. He growled in warning when the Juggernaut sniffed and nipped at him. Their growls rose in pitch, clawing starting to get involved.

"Stop, no fighting! We have to find your brother, we don't have time for this!" Maka snapped and they bowed their heads, the docile twin making some clicking sounds and lunging out of her grasp. He fell to the icy floor in a sprawl of limbs and did his best to

shuffle toward the forest, his clicking growing louder. Maka followed behind him, leash tight in her hand, nervous because he was certainly cold, how could he not be?, but she needed him to find his brother!

Fortunately, Maka found the mischievous dragon clicking and whining beneath a rock, his wings limp down his sides. At the sight of them, he scrambled out from beneath the shelter of the stone and the two brothers collided in a heap of wings, making Maka smile in both affection and relief.

But it did not last long.

"\*\*You\*\*," Maka loomed over the infants, narrowing her eyes at the rambunctious Juggernaut. "Are in so much trouble! GET BACK HERE! NOT YOU, TOO!"

><em>She was sure that, although they could not understand her like Soul, they understood in their own way. "Get back hereeee!" Maka chased after the lost brother for a few seconds, cursing when she grabbed his tail but let go to avoid a scratch. She would have smashed the infant to her chest had a booming snarl not shocked her still. The snarl was enough to subdue all three babes: they did not dare to hiss, only bowed down, the lost twin scuttling close to her and his brother following in his wake, their trembling telling Maka something ugly had just found them.

She turned slowly, an escape plan already in mind, but was shocked to find not a vicious stray dragon, but Soul standing there, staring at them with irked red eyes.

"Soul?" She rasped, clearing her throat. She hastened to stand, squeaking when one of the babies nearly fell out of her arms. "That sound...was that you?"

He nodded.

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I was told you were helping the Caretaker," he told her, simply. "I didn't find you there, so I tracked you."

"Oh," Maka blinked, feeling rather dumb. Of course; Soul had the best nose on this side of the world. Even as a human, she supposed his sense of smell was better than most. "Y-yeah, I was! Kim needed some help with the infants, but one of them escaped. So I had to use his brother to find him and, well, this one just wanted to come with me," Maka peeked at the one that clung to her back still. She rose a brow when he yawned. "I don't know why, exactly, but he seems fond of meâ€œouch!" She winced when the lost brother bit her finger.

At Soul's growl, he squealed and tried to fight his way out of her grasp but she held tight this time, subduing him with one ferocious look. He bowed his head and his brother scaled her leg, watching her with wide eyes. The interloper that hung tight to her back watched the three of them with shining eyes, his excited crow making Maka flinch. He nearly blew her eardrum out! She waved her hand at him and he backed off, but Maka still felt the tip of his nose on the back of her neck.

Soul growled again, a warning for the little dragons to behave, and

Maka stared for a second, her eyes tracing the faintest trace of scales that materialized on his face and down his neck. She had only seen him partially transform a few times, usually for battle against Stein or Black Star, but never out of anger. The babies squealed in unison at the sight, gathering closer but not relenting. Soul's growl deepened and he bared his lengthened teeth at them, eyes flashing a bloody red. They shrunk at the sight and Maka was surprised when they flapped off her, landing on the floor in a sprawl of wings and jumping up to gather somewhere behind her, squealing and yapping all the way.

"How...how did you do that?"

"We understand each other," was all he said and he sent the three mischievous infants a look before looking at his master. "Don't allow them to bully you like that, Maka. Infant dragons are the most difficult to care for. Which is why I hold some respect for the Caretaker."

"They're only infants; of course they'd be harder to care for!" Maka defended.

Soul wrinkled his nose. "They're not as innocent as they make themselves out to be."

"They're babies, Soul," Maka rolled her eyes and reached down to scoop the frightened dragons into her arms again. "I forgive them because they don't know better yet." They immediately clung onto her, their claws pinning onto the leather of her shirt. Soul neared to help but the way she moved, keeping a cool distance between them, made him falter. He stepped back, a shadow crossing his face as she allowed the dragons to crawl over her. One of them climbed up to her shoulder, settling in. His fists clenched when the little one glanced at him, stared, then drew closely to Maka and used her hair as a sort of cover, as if to shield himself from the vicious glare the elder dragon was sending him.

"They're a menace. I don't even know why you're bothering with them," he coolly said.

Maka scowled at his tone. "You were a menace once, too, you know!"

"I was never as difficult as them!"

Maka gave him a disbelieving look he scowled at.

"They're mixed breeds—“one of ‘em can spit fire and acid!"

"And will grow up to be very beneficial to our village one day," Maka sent him a warning look, "because he's able to spit fire and acid!"

"It's unnatural!"

"He's a dragon!"—

"They're mixed breeds! Mixed breeds are the reason!" He cut off when one of the babies nearly toppled off her and didn't bother to continue afterward. He did not want to reveal too much nor did he

want her know of his disdain for mixed breeds. They tended to be hostile and far more dangerous than most because of their mixed genes. His father would often dispose of mixed breeds because they were filth born into pure-bred bloodlines, but then again his father held a general disdain for those out of their family.

Soul remained silent, watching her gather them up properly and start walking back to the Caretaker. He was not ignorant to the way she purposely sidestepped when he drew too close nor the way she avoided looking at him. There was something in his chest that ached and felt wretched. He touched his throat and spared another glance at his master, how she cooed at one of the dragons in her care like she had once cooed at him. His eyes dropped down to his hand, his five fingers and normal nails and human skin.

He hated it.

By the time they reached the nesting cage, Maka had managed to keep the three dragons from fighting by cooing one to sleep and allowing the other to lick the tips of her hair. The baby sneezed when some of it bothered his snout and Maka smiled. Soul rolled his eyes at them, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his winter coat.

Kim had spotted her from afar and met her halfway, a worried crease between her brows when she found her friend trying juggle three dragons on her person. She noticed Soul belatedly, but hadn't had time to properly greet him when the interloping infant detached itself from Maka and flung onto Kim excitedly.

"Maka, I thought you left? What are you doing out here? And with the Juggernauts! And this little guy, the Sky Sweeper," Kim arched a brow at the Sky Sweeper that sniffed her for food, nibbling on the edge of her apron. She held tight onto the baby. "What happened?"

"One of them escaped," Maka sheepishly admitted. "And those two followed. I needed the twin so he could sniff him out, which he thankfully did."

"She," Soul quietly interjected from behind her.

"What," Maka blinked. "She?"

Soul nodded. "They're both female. The Sky Sweeper is male."

"O-oh...Right!"

Soul rolled his eyes; she would never admit she was wrong.

Kim smiled at Soul. "Are you interested in being a Caretaker, Eater?"

"Absolutely not," he deadpanned.

"\_Soul\_," Maka hissed, low enough for Kim not to hear.

"Ah, well," Kim laughed. "I see. That's a shame. They seem to really like you."

Soul snorted derisively but remained silent upon glancing the searing

look in his masters eyes. He remained silent as Kim led them back to the cages, her voice lightening as Maka recounted her little adventure with the dragons. The twin that sat on Maka's shoulder was the last to go into the cage and it had been because she stubbornly clung on, keening in panic when they tried to detach her from Maka. Kim had to pry her off Maka. Soul watched as the baby flapped her wings and tried to latch herself back onto his master. He refrained from snarling, but did growl lowly in warning when she continued to make a fuss.

"Wow, it seems she really likes you, Maka!" Kim laughed, making sure her talons didn't pierce her hand. "She's so rowdy! It's okay, baby, you can see Maka again tomorrow! Shh, shh!" Kim gently placed her back into the cage and Maka watched her crawled near the sides and keen, a guttural sound that sounded like continuous clicks.

"What's that sound she's making?"

"It's a call," Soul explained, calmly.

"Call?"

"Infants use it to call for their mother when they're lost or frightened," Kim added.

Maka blinked and looked back at the baby dragon, whose clicking had become keens. "Is it...?"

"Aww, how cute! She thinks you're her mommy, Maka, isn't that sweet? It must be because you went to save her sister!" Kim gushed, brightening at the prospect. The young ones usually bonded with her, however it wasn't rare to have one rebellious infant from the group bond with another person. "You can take care of this one until she's of-age! Or even only until your dragon returns, Maka, so you won't be so lonely all the time! I know how lonely you get when Soul is not with you!"

"I do not get lonely!" Maka replied hotly.

Kim laughed. "Yes, you do! You told me once, remember?" She lowered her voice, thinking Eater could not hear. "There's no shame in that! Sometimes I get lonely, too, when I'm away from my dragons for too long!"

Maka felt her face redden horribly, very aware of the stare she was receiving from Soul. "I...I'll see if I can drop by tomorrow."

"Goodâ€"oh, you should drop by feeding time! I'll show you where I keep the milk, and show you how to fill up the skins tomorrow!" Kim ranted, excited at the prospect of having someone to talk to during feeding time.

Soul heard Stein call for Kim first and, when the man rose his voice so it carried down the long stretch of the cavern, watched as the Caretaker quickly bid them both goodbye to assist the ever-busy Keeper. He clenched his jaw when Kim reminded Maka to drop by tomorrow to care for the Juggernaut and watched as Maka looked back at him with an uncomfortable smile and didn't do anything else. The wretchedness in his chest swelled and, before she could turn and lead

the way out, he sneered:

"Are you that disgusted with me? That you can't even look me in the eye anymore?"

Maka whipped her head to him, shocked. "What?" She looked around, finding them alone, and hissed, "What are you talking about? I'm not disgusted with you!"

His eyes flashed dangerously. "You flinch away from me. You don't try to get any closer than three feet and...you haven't sought me out in days! You told me that there would be no exceptions to our training yet we haven't trained in over a week!"

"Now, wait just a moment," Maka began fiercely, eyes sparkling. "I am not disgusted by you! And the only reason I have not sought you out is because Stein suggested I give you some space so you could find your bearings on your own. He thought it would be beneficial if I...if I let you learn about how our system works on your ownâ€!"

"You dumped me with Black Star!"

"I thought you liked Black Star!"

"He's loud and he gets on my nerves. This entire village does! I can't find you, I have no idea where you are, because there are too many smells surrounding me and I've lost touch of yours," he revealed, bitterly. His head hurt from being around so many people, and Stein frustrated him more than anyone would believe. Everyone did, now that Soul thought about it. "I just wanted to be with you when I transformed. That's the only reason I did it, so I could speak to you in your language. That's why I learned it!"

Maka closed her mouth, feeling guilt swamp her. She hadn't known he felt so strongly about it and she was guilty to realize that just because Soul happened to be able to transform into a human didn't make him anymore social than he had been when he was a dragon. She thought him happy in a crowd, but failed to realize that politely detached did not mean content. Soul had always been a solitary figure and had spent the majority of his time with her; of course, she thought scathingly to herself, of course it would come as a shock to him to be separated from her so abruptly.

"I thought you liked being human," Maka told him, quietly. She looked up from her feet, allowing the trouble that had bothered her heart show for the first time. "I just...I thought you'd like being human more than a dragon and...leave."

"Leave?" Soul repeated, incredulously. "Is that really what you thought? Why would I leave you? You're my master, we're a team! You told me that!"

"Shut up!" Maka shouted, embarrassed by his sheer look of disbelief. These had been real concerns to her days ago but now they sounded silly to her, too. "I mean, you can speak now and you have a place in our society and I just thought that you'd like it better as a human than as a dragon! I mean, for one, you're free as a human while as a dragon you're technically...owned by me."

"You own me by my \_own\_ choice."

Maka arched a brow at his arrogant tone. "Pardon me?"

"My kind is above that sort of servitude," he clarified at her flat look. "We can think. We can speak. We \_are \_human, but we are also \_dragon\_. We are \_both. \_So there's no need to be led around like the others. But I \_want\_ you to own me," Soul continued, ignoring the flush of embarrassment at his plain words. "That's the reason I allowed you to use me like any other dragon. I am your weapon when you battle, Maka, and I don't find that degrading," he held her eyes, her impossibly green eyes and felt something else tighten his chest; an emotion that also made his tongue thick and his blood rush. "But if you don't want me anymore, tell me now."

"I...." Maka tried to push down her flush to no avail. She pointed a finger at him, brought it down and pressed a hand over her burning cheek. This was by no means a confession yet her gut still fluttered like it was one and it only served to further enrage her. So she did the only thing she could: scream. "\_Of course I want you to continue being my dragon, Soul! \_I just thought you would like it better as a human! I thought you would be happier without being dragged into battles and hurt for my cause andâ€"!"

"I knew what I was getting myself into when I allowed you to take me back to your village," Soul cut her off. "But I stayed with you all the same. I allowed it, because there is no one else who I would want to fight alongside with than \_you\_."

Maka swallowed, the graveness in his eyes successfully pushing back her shyness. She saw he was serious and then she thought about his kind, how different it must be for them and how important something like this must be to someone who was essentially at the very top of the food chain.

"So you'll stay with me...?"

His face finally softened. "Yes."

She felt a smile curve her lips and brighten her eyes and the weight that had anchored itself to Soul's ribcage disappeared. "Alright then. I'll talk to Stein and work something out with him." She reached forward and grabbed his arm, squeezing to feel hard muscle beneath. But she still frowned. "You're getting soft. We have a lot of training ahead of usâ€"I want you up by dawn, we're working through to the afternoon tomorrow! We have to make up for lost time!"

She didn't step back when he shifted his weight and Soul allowed a sharp grin to mar his handsome face. "Any earlier?"

"Don't try me," she warned.

Soul's fingers lightly touched the edge of her shirt, his eyes grazing over the pinpricks in the leather from the infants climbing around. Maka was talking now, a lightness to her tone that he had dearly missed. He listened as he always did, this time able to respond unlike before, and followed her when she happily trotted over to the cage that held the tiny dragons. He wrinkled his nose at the Juggernaut that crowed for her, her awkward and underdeveloped wings

slapping rock as she tried to climb up.

"She must miss her mama," Maka commented sympathetically, reaching through the bars to pet her head. "I wonderâ€"ack, what theâ€"? Maka's eyes rounded when she saw the familiar white tail of her dragon but, when her eyes flicked up, she was met with a very human Soul. "How did youâ€"!?" The question stayed lodged in her throat when he wound his tail around her legs and dragged her against him, his arms wrapping around her and a rumble sounding deep in his chest. "Soul, what are you doing?! Let me go, you stupid reptâ€"IAL! Ack, no, \_you'll drop me!"

"That \_thing\_ just wants to use you for your milk!"

"My \_what?\_ Soul, I can't breast feed, you moron!" Maka shrieked.

He snorted and grinned, his arms squeezing just below her chest tauntingly, "Not with \_those\_ you can'tâ€"!" However, the comment only earned him a bone-cracking elbow to his jaw that resulted in him leaping away from her to cradle his jaw. He glared at the Juggernaut that crowded out in delight.

"ARGH! You're right! You should just turn back into a dragon and stay that way! You'd be less obnoxious! Why did you ever turn human, you're just useless as one!"

Soul snorted, doubting it. He was equally obnoxious as a dragon however he admitted he rather liked being able to press her so close to him as a human. It was easier to hold her. He hadn't found many reasons to transform aside from being close to Maka and touching Maka and speaking to Maka and being able to stay with Maka longer now that he was not thrice her size. Soul shoved his hands in his pockets and watched Maka coo down at the baby dragon, who crowded back happily. Despite himself, a tiny smile curled his lips at the sight.

"Hey, Soul?" Maka straightened, glancing shyly at him. "Do you... do you think we can fit in a quick flight or two before dinner?"

Soul grinned, revealing razor-sharp canines. "Three if you're as good as they say you are!"

Maka grinned back, fire crackling in her emerald eyes. His throat grew tight, palms sweaty. "Of course I am! Come on! Before Black Star comes to find you!" She boldly grabbed his hand when he didn't move and ran out of the Keepers dwelling, Soul hot on her heels.

Just down the stretch of hall, Stein smiled and continued to jot down his annotations on Maka's ever-elusive dragon.

## 7. Chapter 7

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett</strong>

"One more stitch and it'll be complete," Kid murmured under his breath, sweat beading his forehead. He stabbed the sewing needle into the leather and pulled, carefully wiggling the point through the material again before he pulled once more. He managed to knot it in place and had been about to carefully snip the thread when a hand

suddenly slapped his back, shrieking laughter following his scream.

"BLAST! NOO!" Kid shouted in horror, looking at his ruined holster. He swiveled to face Patty, who muffled giggles in her hand.  
"Patricia, \_you littleâ€œ!"!"

"Now, you were not about to shout at my sister, were you, Kid?" another voice drawled, coming from the entrance of his home. Kid cringed; his wife \_would\_ follow right after her sister. She was taller than her sister, hiding a voluptuous figure behind heavy armor and leather. The armor covered all vital areas and then some. The armor had been adjusted to fit her figure although she often complained she was gaining weight and needed to train more whenever the armor hugged her too tight. She wore a thick furred coat over herself, the color gradient gray unlike the usual browns and blacks, and her boots reached just above mid-thigh. However, the warm fur stopped around her knee while the rest remained leather. Her hair was loose that morning, likely due to the sudden chill that had descended upon their small village as winter drew closer. It would be colder above the clouds, something Liz learned well the first time she traveled with Kid on his dragon.

"Don't be ridiculous," Kid recovered, turning back to his holster. He grimaced at the awful knot that was left behind. "She only ruined my \_best\_ holster..."

"Teehee! Aw, don't feel so bad, big brother!" Patricia laughed, bouncing over to him and giving him a one-armed hug. "You can always buy another one!"

Kid looked at his holster mournfully. "I \_liked\_ this one."

"When do we head out?" Liz asked instead, waving at her sister to catch her attention. "Patty, don't you have any classes this morning?"

"Not until midday," she replied, happily. "Are you two going on a mission?"

"That's what I'm here for," Liz told her. She tugged on her coat, pulling it off her for the moment. "It's damn hot in here, Kid, how are you not melting?"

"I'm cold-blooded," he murmured and smiled slightly at Liz's arched brow. "You're early. We do not leave for another four or so marks."

"The last time I was late, I didn't hear the end of it from you! I figured I'd come early to see what you were up to," she ran her fingers through her long corn silk hair. She had on a long-sleeved shirt, he noticed, rather than her usual armor plating. \_Just\_ armor plating. Kid often had the task of reminding the flighty men from the fields that she was married and he had no intention of letting her go any time soon. Liz said it was because it was too hot during the summer, which he agreed to an extent, but that didn't mean men would keep their eyes on their shoes when she walked past.

"Black Star will be accompanying us," Kid told her, returning his focus to his holster. Patty wandered to his fireplace, peeling bark

off logs and amusing herself by poking the flame that burned bright within the fireplace with it. "Although we are more than qualified, he yearns for adventure. I decided to let him come."

"Good! That moron has been snippy ever since Mifune started slowing down in his rounds."

Kid spared her a glance. "Mifune is older than most dragons, wiser as well. He's good for him; he needs someone to think for him, sometimes."

"All times," she muttered.

Kid cracked a smile, rubbing a finger over the knot in his holster. Now it did not look as wrinkled and ugly as before. "Then again, it might not be age. Soul is a formidable opponent, even in a spar, and he's proven his intelligence time and time again."

"Oh, you should hear Maka go off about how tremendous her dragon is!" Liz laughed. She stretched, scowling when the sharp edge of her armor dug into her collarbone. She adjusted the plating as she said, "She may as well marry the damn beast, since she's so in love with him! Kid, am I gaining weight? I feel like I am."

"You're just fine," Kid told her sincerely. "I'd rather you gain some weight, actually, they foretell this winter to be worse than the last."

"I don't think it can get worse; the last was horrible," Liz looked at her sister worriedly.

"I don't doubt it can get worse. The northern villages have it worse than us, however, we are still fortuitous," Kid stood up, strapping the holster on his thigh. He tightened the straps of his armor and had been about to buckle himself when smaller, more feminine hands, took over. He looked to find Liz helping him, a crease between her brows. He reached up to smooth it over with his thumb, his eyes soft and his smile reassuring. "Your sister will be fine."

"My sister is still weak; she nearly died of illness last winter, had it not been for...you," she hesitated, looking up with gratitude.

"I told you it was fine; you do not need to pay me back," Kid said and placed a hand on her cheek. Liz leaned into it and once more Kid marveled how absolutely unguarded she could be with him. She was not known to be this gentleâ€"like Maka, she was fierce and did not allow any sort of vulnerability to show. She was often the one to bully the guards and Meisters, actually, always causing fusses with her sister laughing all the way through.

"Muah!" Patty shouted from behind them, kneeling by the fireplace. Kid sighed and Liz smiled wryly as her sister made kissy faces at them. "You two are almost as mushy as Maka and Eater!"

"Eater?" Kid repeated, frowning.

"The new blacksmith Sid took in," Liz told him swiftly. "He goes by Evans although everyone has taken to calling him Eater for his teeth. Sharp as knives, I have absolutely no idea what he sold to get such things nor why. He eats like he's starved, too, he's almost as bad as

Black Star," Liz told him with an air of disinterest. He had obviously crossed her in someway, Kid noted.

"I heard Sid too in a new apprentice. I have not seen him around the village, however..."

"He's good friends with Black Star," Liz rolled her eyes here and they brightened in the next second. "But practically attached to Makaâ€"call her name, and he'll look so fast he might break his neck one day!"

"Maka doesn't mind?"

"She might've found her feminine will," Liz smirked at him. "About time, too, I thought she was dead inside for the longest time."

"...I don't like the sound of it," Kid frowned. Although he trusted Maka's judgment, he had not spoken to this Eater person at all. Maka had never allowed a man to touch her in an otherwise intimate mannerâ€"the most he and Black Star, her closest male friends, ever got to touching her were through brief hugs or slaps on the back after a finished mission. To be honest, the most contact she had was with her dragon, but now this man? Kid found it suspiciousâ€"twenty one years and suddenly she had nothing against being with a man? He remembered very clearly just how adamant Maka had been about never letting herself be swayed by a mans charms.

"Don't think about it so much," Liz interrupted his racing thoughts. "I've spoken with him. He's rather rough and he has a mouth on him, but he's just right for herâ€"mouthy, doesn't like to go down without a fight just like her. But he's also calm, something Maka is not. She needs someone to balance her out! I think he'd do just well," she assured and squeezed his arm a bit. "This might be really good for her. She's always alone with that dragon of hers, that can't be healthy."

Kid parted his lips to reply but it was cut short by a loud hoot. He looked to the window and Liz drew away from him, setting a hand on her hip as Black Star came pounding at their door.

"Early," Kid bit out. "Everyone is \_early\_ today!"

"I just want to get in one more assignment before winter sets in!" Liz defended herself. But her real reason was revealed right after: "Also, I want to go and scavenge for some of those berries that Kim said were fantastic for your skin! Ahhh, Patty, what were they called again? No, were you even there?"

As Liz and her sister spoke, Kid made his way to his door.

"YOU READY KID?! LET'S GO! WE'RE WASTING TIME!" was what he was greeted with and Kid held a hand up to calm the overly-excited man. He was all dressed in his armor and Kid dryly noted his new head wear: a thicker helmet, with metal covering his ears. It was no doubt a new design Sid had been working on: the helmet was more encasing than his own and the horns at the top, he noticed idly, were most \_definitely\_ from that vicious Monstrous Nightmare he had taken down all on his own a few years ago. The talons were to show his strength in defeating the dragon that was ranked as one of the most dangerous

to their territory.

"Relax, Black Star. You understand the assignment, right? It's only a scout. I don't want you to cause a fuss for no reason," Kid warned, his face grave. "You know what happened the last time we received one of these warnings." He spoke about the hoard of Monstrous Nightmares that had nearly ravaged their village—the hoard that had nearly cost him his own life, at one point.

"This time we'll be fine 'cause I'm with you! We can take on a hoard of 'em!" He boasted, pounding a fist into his chest. "Bring it on!"

"Just because you defeated one," Kid pointed to his helmet, "does not mean you can defeat a hoard. They work in groups; we'd be dead in minutes. If things get ugly, we separate and meet away from the village down by Gallows Way. We do not need to lure them to the village, you hear me?"

"But if it is the Asura, for real this time?" Black Star prompted. He tightened the tape he had wrapped around his hands as Kid spoke:

"We must return immediately and contact Chief Albarn."

He screwed his face up at the answer. "We should just get rid of it while we can!"

"Don't be foolish, Black Star, two against an Asura is ridiculous! They're even worse than Monstrous Nightmares; they spit acid and fire and burrow underground. Although we have an advantage by being in the air, Asura's can leap just as high as we can fly and if he were to catch us..."

"We'll beat it within an inch of its life!" Black Star threw his head back in a guffaw and Kid sighed, giving up for now.

He thought about it for a second and, before he could convince himself otherwise, said: "By the way, Black Star, about Eater!"

"Are we ready now?" Liz popped up from behind Kid. "It's growing colder and I want to be back early so I can put the mask on my fa—" I mean, relax after a long mission," she grinned sheepishly at Kid's dry look.

"Later," Kid muttered to Black Star. Black Star scratched the back of his head and shrugged at that. Kid turned to his wife and motioned outside with his head. "We head out now. You have everything?"

Black Star rolled his eyes as they both began to bicker about who left what and made his way back outside into the light mist of snow. He could hear his comrades follow closely behind, Liz whining at Kid about making a stop somewhere for some stupid mask, but his attention was quickly caught by Mifune. The elder dragon had most definitely seen its glory years and they were not now. He was hunched and seemed tired, but there was an unmistakable peacefulness to him. Black Star could never understand what stirred such serenity within his dragon but certainly, as he rubbed his snout and flashed him a grin, it helped during their assignments. Mifune had a peaceful aura that

centered him and helped him think.

"Ya' ready, boy?"

Mifune exhaled and drew himself up tall, his tail curling around him elegantly. Black Star effortlessly climbed onto his back, securing his feet into the stirrups and ensuring the reigns were tight around his hand. He looked over his shoulder to find Kid fiddling with something on his saddle, his two-headed dragon shifting with impatience.

"Hey, what's the hold up? I promised a friend I'd go drinkin' with 'em later and we're wasting time sitting around here!" He yelled and yelped when Mifune jerked, his way of telling him to quiet down.

"I WANT IN!" Liz shouted back.

"Liz!" Kid hissed.

"I may be your wife but I am not your slave," she loftily huffed.  
"You never let me have any fun anymore!"

"It's a \_tavernâ€"!\_"

"You can come if you want, no one is telling you no. It'd be a lot more fun if you came, actually, you need to unwind, Kid," she squeezed his shoulder and smiled against his cheek, slyly. Her hand reached dangerously close to his belt. "You're tense. I'll fix that for you when we get home."

"I, well," Kid sputtered, tongue-tied. They would come to a compromise later, he decided broodingly, guiding his dragon forward. "Let's get going! Before Black Star decides to go off on his ownâ€"nevermind," he added dryly, watching Black Star guide his dragon into the sky with an exhilarated hoot, disappearing above the clouds. "It'll be impossible to catch up now..." But he still hurried, hoping he would be able to catch up with his friend before he got too ahead of himself.

\* \* \*

><p>Maka sighed with relief as she entered her home, shaking off the snow that had caught in her hair. She pulled off her coat and thick gloves, leaving them by the front door like usual. She had paid the baby Juggernaut a visit while Soul was elsewhere, although it was no longer as small as before. The dragon reached her thighs now and was always competing with Soul for her attention, something that irritated her half the time because Soul would grab her hand and stubbornly hold on, no matter what she did. Stein mentioned to her it was a protective instinct, but she was convinced Soul feared she would stop feeding him dinner every night if she shifted her attention to the little one.</p>

She called out for her father and, when no one called back, fixed her hair up in a messy bun and made her way to her tiny cot by the fireplace. She had been undoing the string of her blouse when she heard shifting. Maka frowned and looked around, her eyes landing on the usual scrounge of blankets and pillows on the floor. But she froze at the sight of lazy red eyes watching the hand that was undoing her shirt with interest.

"SOUL! WHATâ€"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!?" Maka shrieked, hastily covering her chest with her hands, face flushed. "Aren't you supposed to be training with Stein?"

He grunted at her shriek, his ears ringing, and shifted so he was curled into a ball beneath a pile of blankets. "M'cold," he grunted back. "And Stein said that if I'm outside in the cold too long, I'll die or something."

Maka blinked and rolled her eyes, quickly tying her shirt back on. "Soul, that doesn't just apply to you. If anyone were to be out in the cold for too long, they'd die, too."

"He said me in particular because I'm cold-blooded," he thought about it and then shrugged, not finding the motivation to remember much else. "He told me to stay indoors near fire when I'm human."

"What about when you're a dragon? I've taken you out in a blizzard before," Maka frowned, crossing her arms over her chest.

"After a fight," Soul pointed out.

"Well, what's that got to do with anything?"

"I was overheated," he said and smirked when she frowned down at him, knowing he was right.

Maka made herself a note to ask Stein about that before she grabbed a long sleeping gown, kicking her foot into Soul's shoulder for scaring her earlier. He barely roused, a low rumble vibrating from him but nothing else. She changed out of Soul's sight and, when she returned, she found him still dozing under his many sheets and pillows. He seemed far too comfortable for someone who was a fearsome beast. Maka carefully walked around his nest and hopped into her bed, scooting up so she could sit and continue to read her book under the light that came in from her windowpane.

"You went to visit her, didn't you?" Soul mumbled from his nest.

"Hm?"

"That half-breed from the Keep."

"Soul!" Maka chided. "Don't call her that. She's fine the way she is."

He brooded in silence and then decided to ignore his annoyance. He knew better than to think Maka would leave him for that dragon, just as she had trust in him not to leave her now that he could keep his human form. He turned on his back, able to see just a sliver of his master sitting on her bed. Her hair was up in a bun, he took note, she must be hot. She often tied her hair up in a bun when she was hot. It was strange, considering the snowfall outside, but Maka was strange all by herself.

"...Black Star is out on a mission," she told him after reading a chapter in her book. He shifted so he could hear her better. "With Kid and Liz. There are rumors about an Asura in the vicinity again

and it's causing a panic."

Soul flashed his eyes to her, silent as he waited for her to continue.

"My father is afraid it's another hoard of Monstrous Nightmares like it was last time, remember? It's in their nature to come out during the winter," she placed the book on her stomach and looked down at Soul, finding him looking back at her as always. She dropped her eyes away from his. "I know some guards who refuse to fight against them if it is. They're scared because of what happened last time. We couldn't help them at the time because were still training, but now..."

"Monstrous Nightmares are not all you need to fear," Soul stated simply. "There are far worse."

"...Whatever they are, we're going this time. We're \_fighting\_."

"Yes, my Master," he smirked and her shoulders relaxed at the playful ring in his words. It was a good sign; Soul was often someone she consulted before missions, even when he had been a dragon. They had their ways of communication back then, but now it was easier. She sank back in her bed, pressing her book to her chest as she gazed out her window. He watched her for another second before burrowing his nose in his blanket and fitting in some sleep before dinner.

\* \* \*

><p>Black Star knew his short-comings better than anyone else did, but he also knew his <em>strengths <em>better than anyone else. Although his friends, most often Kid, barked at him to fix his stance or think about this decisions, Black Star was no fool. He did understand how dangerous this job could be, remembering once how Maka had her arm caught between a slain dragon and the ground when she was slung off Soul mid-battle. It was pure luck Soul had been able to push the dragon off her carefully enough to release her arm, or she would have been crippled for life. He had also had close calls, being swatted off his Mifune mid-flight coming to mind. It was a dangerous job and, most often, a fatal one, especially for inexperienced Meisters. He and Maka had their lessons brought to life through arduous assignments that sometimes made him question the elders judgements.

But, because of it, they were better now.

Perfection was something one chased forever, but Black Star liked to think he came close.

"KID!" Black Star roared, his eyes widening when Liz reached for her bow and notched it, shooting at the Scarer who flew in confused circles. Scarer's were blind and small dragons, and only knew their way around by smelling fear. Here, as they both fought the hoard the Asura had brought along with it, there was no fear. There was only determination. "They're comin' out of nowhere! How many does this damn thing have with it?"

"More than this, I'm sure!" Kid hollered back, pulling on the reigns roughly and veering his dragon out of harms way. "We need to fall

back!"

They had been caught unawares in their scout; in fact, he and Black Star had been flying side-by-side, discussing other areas they could search before nightfall, when suddenly Liz screeched at him to duck and he just missed a fireball to his head. Things had rapidly spiraled out of control from there: they were not even the target of the Asura's ire, it was another dragon, one of which Kid had never seen before. This one was midnight blue, svelte and appeared almost like a serpent mid-flight. This dragon wove through all of their attacks, sucked in air and unleashed a devastating black ball of energyâ€"it was all Kid could describe it as, as it cleared forest and charred the earth.

"We have to go, Kid, we can't stay here!" Liz shouted at him, holding onto his shoulder to keep her steady. She drew another arrow, shooting it dead-center at the dragon who hovered too close to them. He fell swiftly, landing on the floor with a thump, the sound soft compared to the roars and hisses of the ones that still lingered in the air. Liz caught sight of a black and green one, a foreign one, an Unknown, and she swallowed her fear enough to shout, "He's got a hoard of Scarers, those things eat blood! We have to get away!"

"Don't be scared," Kid told her sharply, holding her eyes. He could read her rising fear in them. "We'll survive. Just keep your guard up. We'll be fine."

"M..mhm!" She nodded, steeling herself. "Do you recognize any other dragons?"

"A Monstrous Nightmares, and a Flesh-Eating Mammoth," Kid grimaced, not liking this at all. "We have no choice but to fall back! We're no use to Spirit dead!" He pulled back and dove beneath the forest canapes before any other dragon could attack him, shouting at Black Star to follow. He glanced over his shoulder, seeing flashes of his comrade through the branches. "Why isn't he following? We have to leave, now, before they turn their full focus on us!"

"I don't know, perhaps he's just trying to get rid of some so they don't follow," Liz told him, squeezing his shoulder. "He'll be fine! It's Black Star! It'd take a real beast to kill him!"

"Those are real beasts," Kid said grimly, knowing he'd at least have to drop Liz off at a safe place before going back for his friend. Before he could change his mind, Kid hurried his dragon along and hoped Black Star would hold out until then.

\* \* \*

><p>As Black Star watched his friend disappear behind a flourish of snow-coated trees, he turned his sights back to the dragon who collected black flames in her mouth and expelled them with a fierce roar. She was magnificent, even <em>he</em> was enthralled watching her dodge every attack and deliver her own with deadly force. But she was also wounded; he could see blood drip down her scales, had seen her snarl and cough a glob of blood after every attack of hers. She was in dire need of medical attention, but Black Star did not stop to help her.

He had never seen a kind of dragon like her before and, by just seeing what she could do, he was not about to try and figure out what else she could do.

"Mifune, let's go," he grit his teeth, his ache to fight nearly making him change his mind. But even the great he could not fight so many dragons on his own, not with an Asura there overlooking and offering aid where needed. "Weâ€!" He saw red first, then felt the flames burn into the skin of his shoulder. He barely had time to pull Mifune back before the blasted old lizard lunged forward, ignoring his will. "What are you doing!? Dumbass, if we go in there, we'll DIE!" He snarled, pulling on the reigns roughly. He stopped suddenly when he saw they were ganging up on them, slowly enclosing them. "I'M NOT ABOUT TO DIE WITHOUT BECOMING A LEGEND FIRST!" He roughly pulled on his reigns, bent on bulldozing through the, when Mifune dove down and threw him off his back. Black Star crashed into the ground and bared it with a grit of his teeth, staggering up right after. He held his wounded arm, eyes wide as he saw that they had turned their attention towards themâ€"Mifune had saved him, Black Star realized numbly, he was still protecting him.

Mifune clashed with a larger beast, younger than him by years, and Black Star watched Mifune swiftly injure the others wings, biting into his neck and tearing flesh. But the other dragon was quick, blasting him back with a roar of blue fire, hotter than anything Black Star had ever felt. He could feel the heat from how far away he was, and his stomach plummeted.

"No," he uttered, realizing what Mifune was doing when he lunged at the other dragon again. "MIFUNE! STOP!" Black Star snarled, his eyes savage. He knew what he was doing; he was causing a distraction. He was buying Black Star enough time to escape.\_ But he would not have it; no, he would not. They were a team, they were partners, and they were in this togetherâ€"not separately. There was no glory in defeating the enemy if a friend was sacrificed. "GET BACK HERE! IF YOU WANNA' FIGHT, FINE, WE'LL TEAR THESE ASSHOLES APART \_TOGETHER!\_" He saw the black serpent twirl in the air before she was suddenly shot by a lightening strike.

Black Star paled upon realizing that the Asura also had a Thunderous Nightmare in his hoard.

"Fuck," Black Star backed away before the dragon could crash into him and he was shocked when Mifune dodged the dragon he had been fighting to slow the black-scaled dragons descent, using his back to carry her down to safety. He deposited the black dragon near him and their eyes met at that momentâ€"and Black Star knew what he would do and he was numb to the idea. He had aided him through thick and thin and this was it? This was as far as they would go? They were nowhere near becoming legends; Black Star refused to accept this reality. This was not how Mifune was going to end. This was not it at allâ€"Mifune was destined for glory, he was destined to be remembered throughout the ages with his Meister, Black Star, by his side. People would write songs of their greatness, people would praise them. Yet, as Mifune shielded them from the Thunderous Nightmare's rabid attacks, Black Star knew he would not be able to take the hit.

"Please..." someone gasped, their voice muffled with gurgles. Black Star turned to find a girl with long, ink-black, hair in the place of the majestic black dragon, naked and bloody. Her hair fell down her

body thickly, reaching past her thighs, but it was tangled with blood and dirt. She reached out to him, her oceanic eyes desperate. "Run! Don't let his sacrifice be in vain! You have to \_go!\_"

"He's," Black Star managed a fake grin that made the injured dragon-hybrid ache for him. "He's gonna' be just fine! No way something like this is gonna' bring my dragon down! There's no way!"

"You..." she whispered, watching as he stood before her and brandished his axe, his shoulders broad and his stance ready. "You have so much faith," she cried, her words a whisper compared to the cracks of lightening and fire that roared above them. She believed him fully, watching as he jumped into the frenzy with a roar that shook her to her bones. She crawled up to her knees, reaching down to touch her side. It came back bloody but she ignored it in favor of watching that man, Black Star, fight alongside his dragon so powerfully. He had so much faith, in both himself and his dragon, she admired it. She had been told many tales of how humans abused their dragons, but she knew he would never hurt them. Her eyes glowed with admiration as he fought against creatures who would first crush him than grace him with their attention.

"You can do it!" she cried and smiled when he looked over his shoulder, the edge of his grin just visible to her. She swore his eyes sparked like flint. "I know you can!"

But Black Star didn't have time to say anything before his dragon crashed into the dirt by his side, the crack of lightning loud enough to make his ears ring and his skin prickle. He froze, his heart loud in his ears, his stomach down to his shoes. He was sure he shouted his dragons name, he would swear it on his parents grave that he did, but perhaps it was only in his head because his roar did not return to him like other times.

He nearly tripped running to Mifune, shouting his name fiercely as he sheathed his axe on the strap on his back. He grabbed Mifune's limp head and pushed it on his side, his fingers trying to pry his friends eyes open. "Dammit! Y-you stole my thunder, you old lizard! I can't match up to that right now! You know that," he gaped, shaking him. "Wake up!" "hey, wake up! Dammit, WAKE UP!" He looked over his shoulder, finding the Thunderous Nightmare roaring into the sky triumphantly. It made Black Star see red. "This isn't it!" "we're gonna' kill that bastard, you hear me, we're gonna' make him regret ever trying to take us on. We're gonna' tear his fucking horns off and wear them on our helmets, we're..." he sucked in air when Mifune opened one eye, the corners crinkling in a reminiscence of a smile, before they closed peacefully.

He had never felt so cold in his life.

"Mifune...?"

He knew death better than anyone. He didn't need anyone to tell him.

He bowed his head and clenched his fists, vowing vengeance for his loyal companion. Black Star stood up, facing the Thunderous Nightmare that hovered above him, his serpentine eyes slit as they met his fearlessly. He pulled his lips back in a fierce snarl, his eyes

crackling with his hate as the creature looked on in disdain. The girl who looked on would swear he looked more like a dragon than any of the ones who flew in the skies.

"When we meet again," he hissed, knowing very well the beast could hear him. "I'll slaughter you. I'll wear your skin as a coat, and your bones as armor. You will rue the day you dared to slay the Great Black Star's comrade!"

He did not flinch when the Thunderous Nightmare roared at the challenge, lightening making his scales burn gold like the sun.

Black Star noticed movement in the corner of his eye and he reached for his axe, but paused when he noticed it was the girl. She looked heartbroken, crawling towards him with unshed tears in her eyes, her hair falling over her shoulder in bloody clumps. His eyes hardened at the sight. Mifune had saved her for a reason; he would not let his friends judgement be in vain. He let his hand rest on Mifune's cold head one last time before he ran to her limp form, dodging balls of fire and lightening as he did. He scooped her up into his arms and ran into the forest, blaming the blurring of the forest grounds on sweat.

\* \* \*

><p>"Maka, have you seen papa's scarf?" Spirit shouted as he closed the door to his home behind him. He looked up with a smile. "I can't find itâ€"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE?!" Spirit shrieked, pointing a finger at Soul, who blinked at him as he shoved his sandwich into his mouth.</p>

"Papa, lower your voice! We have neighbors, you know!" Maka scolded, peeking out of the kitchen to see her father standing there like an idiot.

"B-but, Maka! What is that foul beast doing in my household?"

"Soul lives here, papa, or have you forgotten?" She deadpanned, crossing her arms over her chest. "After seeing him here for the past two months?" She rose a brow at him and watched her father scramble for a reply, ending up puffing his cheeks out and looking crossly at Soul, who only inhaled another sandwich. He had stopped trying to bait her father weeks ago, seeing no use in it since Maka always hit him for it afterwards.

"I thought you'd got rid of him already..."

"You thought wrong," she remarked and set out another plate. "Now behave while I go fetch your scarf for you. I don't want you two to fight like the last time."

"M'not my fault he can't shut up," Soul grumbled, pretending not to notice Maka's glare. Soul looked up as Spirit sat across from him, trying to intimidate him by sneering. Soul resisted a growl and continued to eat the sandwich Maka made him. "So you're really going to stay with us, you beast?" He mocked him. Soul didn't comment. "I swear, if you even think about touching my baby girl, I will slay you where you stand and make your skin into boots!" he hissed lowly, so

Maka wouldn't hear.

"I haven't touched her. Relax, would you?" Soul growled. He looked back down at his sandwich, ignoring his squinty eyes.

"And why haven't you touched her yet?" Spirit eyed him, narrowing his eyes when Soul merely rolled his eyes. Here they went again.

"What, is my baby not good enough for some arrogant halfa? Is that it?"

"What the hell did you call me?" Soul's nostrils flared, taking offense.

"I called you a halfa!"

"Take that back, old man!"

"Who are you calling old!?"

"I don't see anyone else here except you, grandpa!"

"You little shitâ€"!"

"If I hear one more word out of both of you," Maka's voice boomed from the bedroom. Both Spirit and Soul balked at the sound. "I'll have two new pairs of boots by the end of the day!" Both men sat back down immediately, shooting dark looks at each other as Maka sauntered back into the kitchen. She handed the scarf to Spirit and asked Soul, "Are you still hungry?"

He shook his head.

"Papa, are you hungry?" Maka then asked and her father beamed at her, endeared she had asked him. "I can reheat some of the soup I made last night, if you want."

"I would love to, sweetheart, except papa has to go back to work," Spirit smiled reassuringly when she looked, a familiar crease between her brows. Spirit couldn't help but notice how much older she was, how much she looked like her mother. He briefly thought that she would be delighted to know that her daughter was the spiting image of her and just as, if not more, successful than she had been at that age. "I'm awaiting some Meisters to report back to me on some important matters."

"Is it Kid and Black Star?"

"How'd you know about that?" Spirit eyed her, glaring at Soul when he snorted mockingly.

"Papa, I want to know what the mission was. I only got minor details from Black Star, but what was it about? Do you think there's another hoard of Monstrous Nightmares out there?" She demanded, clenching her fist when Spirit's face hardened. Soul shifted his gaze to Spirit, his chews slow and thorough as the man spoke:

"We think it might be something worse. I had Akane go out a week ago to investigate the mountainsides, and there have been no sign of any Monstrous Nightmares coming down from them yet. He thinks they might still be up on the peek since the temperatures are still too high for

them down here. But there has been signs that \_something\_ out there, a lot of somethings. I'm contemplating sending Stein out to hear his opinion on things."

"Is it an Asura?"

"I can't say right now."

"Do you think?"

"...It's very likely," Spirit hesitated. "Asura's are hoarders, dragon hoarders in particular."

"You think he's hoarding Unknowns?" Soul spoke up.

Spirit looked at him. "That's very likely, yes."

He took a bite out of his sandwich. "Then you're right."

Spirit sat up, slamming a palm on the table as he demanded, "If you have something to say, then say it, Eater! The neighboring villages are terrified of another Monstrous Nightmare attack, if this is really something much worse then we have to prepare for it. We must send out alerts and fortify ourselves. And you know something," Spirit sneered, locking eyes with Soul. Spirit loathed how absolutely calm he remained. "You've been hiding something since you came with Maka those years ago, and it's not just the fact that you can transform into a human!"

Soul's eyes flashed red.

"Papa!" Maka barked. "Soul isn't hiding anything! Don't you dare accuse him like that again!"

"But, Maka! Darling, he's hiding something, why else would he know?"

"Because Asura's hoard \_particular\_ dragons," Soul told him, his eyes narrowed with dislike. "It's common knowledge. They don't hoard any dragon, they hoard dragons with particular skills, usually traits that aren't common like fire or acid."

"He's right," Maka agreed and ignored her father's whine to add, "Stein has had time to observe them, and he told me that Asura's have a tendency for hoarding rare dragons. If this is an Asura, for real this time, we're going to need to do a lot more than just block off the village from the forest and mountainsides."

"What more \_can\_ we do?" Spirit sulked, still stung his daughter had sided with the dragon hybrid. His sulkiness quickly evaporated into something graver when Soul dropped his eyes to his plate, his appetite gone.

"Ally yourselves with other villages," Soul shrugged. "You're going to need a lot more than just the army we have here to fend off an Asura."

"Don't you mean defeat?" Maka inquired.

Soul gave her a vicious grin, one that made her throat tight. "You're

out of your mind if you think you can actually kill an Asura with just brute force."

A brutal knocking on the door was what cut off Spirit, and he walked to the door with promise to continue this afterward. Maka could only listen to part of the guards rushed speech before her father grabbed his coat and ran out without another moment. Maka cursed and looked at Soul, who nodded and grabbed both of their coats. He followed close behind her, not liking the plunging feeling he felt deep in his gut.

They arrived at the Keepers Liar to find it empty of her father, however Soul heard him arguing with Liz about something down the stretch of hall. He followed Maka when she suddenly moved deeper into the dwelling, heading over to who Soul saw was Black Star. Kid sat ways away from him, his grave silence making Soul expect the worst. He was tempted to pull Maka back, sensing something sinister and awful from Black Star, but decided that guarding her from close behind would be best.

"Black Star, what happened?" Maka asked anxiously, approaching the man who sat at the corner of the dwelling. He stood up before she could reach him, his chair screeching back. He walked past her wordlessly, leaving her gaping at his backside. She looked at Kid, asking, "What's wrong with him?"

"He's...grieving," he told her after a second. "Mifune is dead."

"No," Maka covered her hand in shock, her fingers digging into her cheek when she heard a roar echo from down the hall. It was followed by a punch to the wall, rock rattling with the force. "Mifune... he didn't make it?"

"He took an attack for him and didn't survive," Kid told her heavily. He stood up, motioning for the opposite end of the hall. "But that's not our only problem. We've also got an Asura prowling the outskirts, with a hoard that contains dragons I've never known existed. Follow me," he said, looking at the man who came with Maka with slit eyes. "Not you."

"He's with me and papa. Let him follow," Maka quickly vouched, and Kid reluctantly nodded. Before Kid could ask who he was, Maka said, "You looked like you wanted to say more. Is the Asura not our only problem?"

"Well, Black Star brought back a woman from the fight. It was hard to understand her, she has a thick accent, but from what we gathered, she was sent here to search for a missing heir to a wealthy family," he told her as they walked. "That person might be the reason the Asura is patrolling so close to villages. She thinks he's searching for him."

"What would an Asura want with a person?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out, but she refuses to say anymore," Kid grimaced. His eyes flickered to Soul but Maka waved him off. "There's something you have to know about this woman."

"What is it?"

"She's not...well, there is not anyway to say this. She's not human," he told her, adding when she caught her confused look. "This might sound completely outrageous, but I saw it firsthand. It's the truth. She's actually... a dragon, she's both human and dragon!"

"Ah. I see," Maka nodded, not at all shocked like Kid expected her to be; even the stranger that trailed behind her was unimpressed. Before Kid could ask \_why they were not as shell-shocked as he still was\_, Maka pushed the door open and paused, taking in the beautiful woman with hair darker than the night skies. She sat on the bed, her back exposed to reveal ugly wounds. Blood stained the sheets from where Keeper Stein was currently replacing her bandages. She looked up at the sound of the door creaking, her impossibly long hair spilling down her shoulders to cover her breasts. She was terribly pale, the battle leaving its mark on the bags under her eyes, the purple bruises on her porcelain skin. There was fear on her face when they walked in, but it was quickly followed by incredulity and then pure glee, and although her voice was hoarse and her accent strong, Maka understood what she cried out:

"I found you!" The name the girl cried out was fierce and foreign, powerful. The name she called out was directed to Soul, who was frozen by the door frame at the sight of a person he never thought he would see again.

"Tsubaki?" he breathed.

"Do you know her, Soul?" Maka asked, looking between them rapidly.

"Soul? Evan?" Kid spoke up, looking at the man with surprise. "You're the one..." But he trailed off when the man's eyes flashed hot like fire. He took a step back, his hand going to his sword, remembering that woman's eyes had flashed similarly, only obsidian to this man's scarlet, before she became a majestic creature of which he had never seen before. "You're a beast, too!" Kid accused. "You're a dragon, like her!"

"Wait, Kid, I can explain!" Maka hastily said, guiltily, but before she could, Tsubaki spoke up again:

"Soul," she repeated, her eyes holding a sadness Soul hardened his eyes at. He was surprised she had such a hold on their language although, in hindsight, he should not be surprised at all. Tsubaki was a loyal servant to his family and she had always been rather good at language, hence having the privilege to read up on some of them. He was sure she knew many dialects by now; in fact, she was an important servant to his family because of her affinity to languages. "Is that what they call you now?"

"I discarded the name you know me as years ago," Soul told her, evenly. "My name is Soul now."

"Discarded," she shook her head mournfully. "You can never discard what you were born with!"

"I did," he sneered. "Father had no problem doing it himself, either. He told me himself."

Tsubaki bit her lip, tried not to let her eyes to water. She had always known that tensions had been high between her Lord and his sons, particularly the youngest one, but she had never known to what extent. "E...even so, your father needs you back! \_We need you back!\_ The kingdom is in wreckage and the binds that keep our home sacred and safe are falling apart! You and your brother were the only ones who were taught to read the olden scripts! Only royal blood is strong enough to withstand the magic and your parents are too weak to rewrite the scripts surrounding our homeland!"

"What about my brother?"

"Your brother left a winter ago," she revealed, quietly. "Married, without consent." She looked down at the sheets. "Your father was furious."

"So he got rid of him, too? Like he did to me?" Soul scoffed, nearly laughed at the situation. He never thought he would be in this position, in a position where his father would be desperate enough to send a servant after him to locate him. He didn't even send a soldier, but a servant. "What does he expect me to do now? Go back and help him after he practically told me that I wasn't worth the blood I was born with?"

"You need to go back and help your people!" Tsubaki argued.

"They're not my people any more! They were never my people, even less after I left," Soul looked away from her shimmering eyes, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Even if I did return, I wouldn't know the first thing to ruling a kingdom, especially one as wrecked as my father's."

"But you could learn! If you go back now, you still have a chance toâ€œ!"

"I'm not going back," Soul cut her off, sharply. He met her eyes, holding them as he said, "I have a duty to someone else."

"A duty?" Tsubaki sputtered, her brows creasing together in confusion. She shook her head, repeating words of old men: "You owe no one anything! You're your fathers son, people serve you!"

"She saved my life and, in return, I gave it to her. I can't leave her."

"But...but your father! What about your family? Your fatherâ€œ!"

"You have your King," he cut her off, words cold. They stung her heart as he said, "I have my Queen," looking up to Maka, who stared back at him, speechless. Tsubaki followed Soul's gaze, drinking in the sight of the person who had turned a promised king into a servant. She expected someone bigger, someone intimidating like that Black Star character. But instead she was met with a woman half his size, her fur coat hiding most of her armor and self. But her keen nose could smell the metal she wore with pride, the bloodshed that had been washed off to await the next. She was fair-skinned with ropes of burnished gold hair falling down her shoulders. She had the

greenest eyes she had ever seen, glowing even under the dim light of the room. She looked misplaced among her armor, but there was a strength in her eyes that intimidated her.

"So if there's anyone you have to beg to go back to save your home," Soul continued. "It's her, not me."

"You..." Tsubaki whispered at Maka, holding her wide-eyes before she bowed as much as her injury allowed and pleaded, "Please. Please allow Soul to return to the kingdom just enough to repair the scripts that surround our homeland! He does not...have to stay," she looked up, falling forward on her elbow when pain bit at her side. Stein reached out to keep her steady, his face shadowed. "If he could just repair the scripts, I can go search for his brother to do the rest! I...I can't bring back a traitor," she choked, refusing to look at him.

Soul's lip twitched, and his eyes flashed red when Kid looked at him.

Maka was caught in that girl's desperate eyes. The room was silent, breath baited as they awaited her response. She wanted to step back and run out of the room, wanted to yell at Soul for keeping such heavy things from her, but also because he had called her his Queen and she was a far cry from royalty. She was nothing but the warrior daughter to a chief of a small village; she knew nothing of great wealth and regal blood, of servants and castles and lords. She couldn't make such a decision for a person, either; the decision was made for her already, how could she deny such a mournful, heart-felt, request?

Maka looked at Soul, tried not to walk up to him and slap him for keeping such a dreadful thing from her. She clenched her fists instead, nails digging into the inside of her palm. She had a feeling he knew what she was thinking of doing, judging by how he bowed his head to her.

She nodded, her voice strong despite the turmoil inside. "Yes. Yes, of course, we'll leave as soon as you're better."

Tsubaki's entire visage glowed and her eyes shone with new hope, something that made Maka swallow hard "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"Are you sure that's a wise decision?" Kid asked her, coming up behind her immediately. "You haven't even discussed it with your father, and if it is Soul that the Asura is after, you could cause more damage than good."

"If the Asura is after Soul, we can lure him away from the village. I have a plan," Maka assured him with a thin smile, then looked at Soul. Her eyes hardened when they met his downcast ones. "You," she pointed out the door. "We have a lot to talk about. Out."

He did as he was told, walking out of the room without another word.

"So it's true, then," Tsubaki said to herself, watching the fair-haired girl leave right after him. The man pale as if with a cold death left as well, after sparing her a fleeting glance. She was

left with the Keeper, who continued to bandage her wounds and made no comment whatsoever. "He's become a servant, like me. He'd rather grovel on his knees than be a lord."

"I don't think Soul see's it that way," Keeper Stein intoned, looking over his spectacles at the saddened girl. "Maka found him half-dead a few miles past here nearly four winters ago. If it weren't for her, you'd have no prince to bring back to your homelands."

"I'd still have his brother."

"Funny thing, his brother," Stein began, wiping his hands of blood with a rag. He sat back, tossing the rag on the table as he meet her gaze steadily. "Do they look alike?"

"Identical, almost. Vhalga...Soul, could not hold his form for long when he was a child. But during the times I saw them together, it was hard to tell them apart," she revealed quietly, her eyes softening with happier memories. "Their eyes burn differently. That was the only way to tell."

Stein studied her for a moment. "Are you certain Asura is here looking for Soul?"

Confusion knit her brows and she said, "Who else could he be looking for? This is why we were sentâ€"the king himself sent the order, this is why I am here!"

"And he betrayed you, sent his own after you to finish you off," Stein silenced her. "What's to say he didn't finish Soul off four winters ago, when he was sent from your land to retrieve him? He's sworn to serve Soul's family, am I right?" Stein's eyes filled with an unnerving knowing. "He's trusted...isn't he?"

"...No," she shook her head when she realized what he was saying, feeling tears well in her eyes. She clutched her chest, pushing out from clenched teeth: "No, he would never do that! He...he might've betrayed me, but he's not...he's not like that! He sweared he would protect them, he's their uncle!"

"Maybe blood is not as strong as you believe it to be," Stein mused, standing up to reach for the pitcher of water left behind by Kim. He poured her a glass and left it by her side, taking his leave without another word at the distraught, shocked, girl.

## 8. Chapter 8

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett </strong>

Soul spent a lot of time remembering his homeland those four winters ago, as Maka tended his grievous injury. He had laid on the cold ground with the smell of summer flowers in his nostrils, when the days were filled with tendrils of light coming through gold-gilded windowpanes. He had laid on the cold ground with days filled with flight lessons, with days spent with his elder brother and their uncle in the gardens, talking while his brother rubbed his head and laughed at his attempt to hold his form. He remembered his brother telling him not to strain himself; there would come a day when he

would be able to hold his human form. He remembered how frustrated he had been with himself. He had been the only one in decades to not be born fully human, but rather dragon. As such, his families servants had been tasked with the unusual job to help him keep his human form and teach him the old tongue instead of the common tongue, which was how most communicated with. His brother had no problem learning the old tongue to speak to his little brother more easily. Their uncle knew various tongues, including the old language of their people, so conversation with him came swift and easy as well.

But most others did not speak the old tongue. This made for a lonely childhood, not that Soul had minded much. He loved his brother, and his brother loved him, and it was fine if others did not speak to him as much as they could. His brother had been enough.

His uncle had always been neutral when it came to him, Soul remembered. He had no negative or positive opinion of him; he was one of the few who only snorted softly when one of his chamber servants came dashing into the room, screaming about him tearing up the curtains again. His brother usually grinned, then cleared his throat and put on his best 'stern older brother' facade and offered to scold him. His mother would press her lips together very tightly, beautiful face scrunched in an attempt not to giggle. His father would merely look away, back to whatever had his attention before the interruption.

Soul had spent a lot of time wondering why his uncle attacked him. His uncle, who had never shown a hint of contempt or hatred towards him. His uncle, who he could very well say he liked. Soul mulled over it restlessly, wanting know with a terrible desperation just why Asura had torn a hole through his chest that day. Soul had been disgraced in front of his family a lot of times by his father for not preforming on the same level as his brother, who made it hard to compete with because he was gifted in studies and combat. Studying had always come harder for Soul, who happened to have the attention span of a common squirrel, as one of his tutors brusquely said once. Wes had always rubbed his head and told him lightly that he had a knack for fighting, anyway; that he was meant for more than reading the olden scrolls, but for leadership. He was meant for greater things than what their father had in mind.

Soul always told himself he would suffer through his parents impossible standards, if only for his brother.

However, the night Soul left, their father had gone too far. But that time, Soul defied him. It had not been long after that that their father decided he had enough of his rebelliousness. He had forbade him the throne, something Soul didn't care much for anyway. But what broke the deal was when his father turned away from him as if he were a disgust, when he ran his hand down his face and said he was not worth the labor and effort if he were nothing but a crude, ungrateful, boy, undeserving of the blood that ran through his veins. His father had always been a cold man, resentful for things Soul knew nothing about, bitter for things Soul did not want to know about. But those words hurt him too deeply, and he had decided to leave.

It had been a good idea at the time.

It was also no surprise his uncle had been sent out to return the

rebellious, ungrateful, brat of an heir.

What \_was\_ a surprise was when they met mid-flight and Asura engaged him in conversation. It was asinine conversation, it made Soul furrow his brows in puzzlement because there was no blizzard; it was scarcely snowing. What was his uncle talking about? There was no awful whipping of wind, blinding snows, bone-deep cold. It was even more baffling when his uncle suddenly grinned, swallowing a deep gulp of air and letting out a ray of fire. This was no time to dodge; Soul had been flying too close to him. He had taken the full-brunt of his strength, directed at an heir who had never been allowed to venture outside and whose attacks were feeble and laughable compared to other, more experienced, dragons.

He remembered how his uncle had rammed into him afterward, dug his claws into his gut and ripped them up to his neck. He also remembered his words, spoken in the old tongue, growled through clenched teeth and a feral grin:

"\_Goodnight, nephew.\_"

Soul hadn't known anything for a long time after that, until he woke up with a god-awful pain in his chest and the cold snow already burying him in his grave. He had tried to leave, tried to do something about the terrible ache in his heart, in his chest, all throughout his body. The snow was cold, the air colder. He thought he would really die there, buried beneath the snow that his brother had once said matched his scales graciously. He thought about how angry his brother would be that he passed before him, and he only wished he could have enough strength to fly back and tell him he was sorry. Sorry for leaving, sorry for thinking he could make it on his own, but, most of all, sorry for disappointing him.

Then she appeared, he would swear out of nowhere, chewing on a sandwich and mumbling to herself. She sat cross legged on the boulder, wearing those thick fur coats that he read about in moldy books. She was not as burly as his books described humans to be, or ugly. He would even say she was pretty, with those big green eyes of hers and button nose. She reminded him of the noble ladies in his court, only their noses were stuck up high in the air and all they did was compare dresses or scales. She also did not smell like dirt and ale and piss but rather like flowers, like the meadow his brother had taken him to when he was a hatchling. That had been when he first breathed fire; his brother had been so proud.

But there was no doubt that she was human, and so he did what any dragon would do: he scared her away, bared his teeth at her and hoped she would leave with her tail between her legs. She might not be as his books described, but he would rather die disgraced than be helped by the likes of her. Doe-eyed she may be, he knew of the travesties her kind had done to his. He knew that every human, for all their good, harbored death in their souls, as blind and bloodthirsty as any half-breed mongrel of a dragon.

But she had not left, to his utter bafflement. She had stayed, and she had nursed him back to health, and she had introduced him to the new delicacy she called 'sandwich' and she had rubbed his head like his brother so often did and she had smiled at him like he mattered. She had rubbed his head and talked to him even though he understood not a single word that came out of her mouth. She spoke

the common tongue but he had never wanted to know it as much as he did during those days. He knew very little words, from the times his brother taught him a sentence or two, mostly the dirty things, because between them existed secret jokes that never failed to make Soul chuckle on a bad day.

Humans, Soul had decided, were strange and curious creatures. He never once sensed bloodlust from her, never once scented anything particularly disgusting, either. She just was, and Soul had even convinced himself that she was not human but something else altogether. She was anything but human; she was fey or elfen or mermaid but not human, most certainly not human, because there was no possible way such a good human being existed. His books, his tutors, his parents, even his brother all agreed that humans were simply no good. They were filth in his fathers eyes, troublesome in his brothers. They were frightening to his mother, and objects to his tutors.

But they were never treasures, not like she was to him.

So he let her keep him, and for a long time he had thought it the other way around. For a long time, Soul believed she was apart of his hoard, his. For a long time, Soul believed that he stayed with her because she was his and he did not take lightly to those taking away his things. He wanted her, like a child wanted a toy, and he was stubborn to keep her even if she shoved him in a cage. He only agreed with the cage because they fed him sandwiches of all kinds, of all sizes, and he was rather obsessed with those, too, and would hoard them if he had enough restraint not to eat them. Metal bars could not keep him out, he knew this from the start, but he stayed put because his treasure would rub his snout affectionately. He did not understand her, but he could read her body language well enough to know what she meant.

He behaved, but never once backed down when someone threatened his treasure. He almost killed Spirit when he distressed her, Soul remembered. He was intent on killing him for a long, long time but Maka always kept him controlled. He should have known from the start that she was not a piece of his hoard, she was not his hoard at all. He should have seen it; he'd heard of other dragons hoards, cousins and uncles and aunts, and they never protected their treasures like he did. If she was his hoard, he would never let anyone see her, because dragons hid their hoards. Hoards were secret things. He had been trusted enough to see his own brothers hoard, only once, mostly jewels and golden goblets and these strange human instruments that his brother called violins. He had hundreds of those, of all sizes but similar shapes, and he would sometimes play them for him and he would marvel the sounds, sweeter than anything he had ever heard.

Maka was not his hoard. She had never been his hoard.

Maka was something much, much more to him.

He ached at the thought of losing her. He would tear through every home to find her, sit on the tallest crag he could find to scent her out, and he would do quite literally the most horrid of things to keep her happy. Their kind, his brother had chuckled once, were always rather obsessive, this seen in their borderline obnoxious pride of their hoards. But Soul had never thought he would become so

attached to a human, a \_person\_, \_a living, breathing, creature that cognated at his level and had a very separate life to his.

Maka was not an object, Maka was a person.

Maka was \_dragon\_, just as fierce and great as any.

But then, what could he call her, if she was the same as him?

"Here," her voice cut through his troubled thoughts like a knife, and the sharp clatter of a plate hitting the table made him flinch. When Soul looked down at his dinner, he gawked at the lettuce leaves he saw there.

"H-hey, what is this?"

"Dinner," Maka flatly told him. She turned around and headed for her bed, ignoring his sputters, which followed with angry shouts of her name. When he saw that she would not acknowledge him at all, Soul turned back to his plate and glared at it. He had never seen her as angry as he had that week ago, when she confronted him about his half-truths and lies. He hadn't seen any reason to tell her of his past life, especially since he shed his birth name and adopted the one she had given him. He had no reason to return, was humiliated to admit that even if he did return and he told his father of his uncles crime, he would be called a liar and exiled again.

His father trusted their uncle like a brother.

Soul learned that blood was not thicker, it was practically water, but try telling his bullheaded father that.

Soul ate his pitiful dinner silently, glaring at the plate all the while. He could hear Maka settle into her bed behind him, even quieter than him. They should be speaking right now, out-witting each other or telling one another about their day. She was being ridiculous, in Soul's opinion, was she blind not to see just why he stayed? It seemed so obvious! He had a duty to her; she saved his life, so in return he must guard her with his. It was two parts duty and one part greed that kept him with her, although his greed to possess her had decreased greatly when he realized she was not an object, not like the things dragons usually hoarded. He was still brooding over what she could mean to him, but could she not be happy just with him?

No, Soul sighed to himself. No, because I lied to her. I didn't tell her why I ran away until it all came out... and I still haven't told her why I'm staying away.

Soul stood up, grabbing his coat.

"I'll be back later."

"Humph. Fine," Maka curled into herself, digging her fingers into her knees so she did not stop him.

"Fine," he mumbled to himself, his ire draining to melancholy when she didn't chase after him after all. She usually did, when he left without telling her where he was going. How was he going to get out

of this one? How was he supposed to admit things to her that he didn't even want to admit to himself? There was no way he was going to be able to tell her why he stayed away, why he refused to help Tsubaki and his father. It was too embarrassing, and the last person he wanted to turn away from him was Maka. He loved her too much for that. Soul's shoulders slumped as he went to the only other place he could go and not be sneered at for what he had done.

"Soul?" Black Star blinked when he saw his friend slouched at his doorway, his eyes grim and his lips down turned. He looked tired. "It's late, aren't you supposed to be with Maka?"

"She's mad."

"Still?" He shook his head, stepping aside to let him through. "It's been a week and you said you were sorry!" He shut the door and led his friend to his kitchen, where Soul could see Sid's work scratched into the wooden tabletop. He had been tinkering with helmets at the table again. "She's really serious if she hasn't forgiven you after you said sorry," he said seriously, and Soul rolled his eyes. Some things could not be recovered with a simple apology, but try telling someone as dense as Black Star that.

"She fed me lettuce for dinner."

Black Star guffawed. "Did she kick you out, too? Is that why you're here?"

Soul's eyes flashed. "No."

Black Star hummed skeptically, but did not push the matter further "Well, you're in luck! I got a spare fifty on me, and a bar right down the street. What'cha say we go feast on some of Jackie's home stew and find ourselves some pretty wench for the night, eh?" He beamed, already grabbing his coat.

"I want a sandwich," Soul grumbled. "You can keep the wenches."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged. "More for me. C'mon!"

Soul followed silently as Black Star spoke about Sid's new armor. There was something off about Black Star since Mifune died. He had returned from the mission unlike himself, and he had not breathed a word to anyone for two whole days. By the third day, he was back to himself, or so he acted. But Soul knew better than to pry about such delicate things, and would never ask him if he had decided on which dragon he would train until he brought it up himself. He had overheard from Stein that Kid believed Black Star was in some sort of denial, for he acted as if Mifune was only off on a short leave and waved things off like nothing.

Soul knew better.

Soul knew just well what death could do to a person, and this was not Black Star rejecting his reality, but rather his own way of accepting the travesty that had befallen him. If Black Star was fine with pretending all was well, Soul was no one to reject his way of coping.

"Hello, Evan!" Jackie cheerfully greeted, slamming down a steaming bowl of stew in front of him. "You're looking a little gloomy tonight. Why the long face?"

He pushed the bowl to Black Star, who hooted before digging in. "I'm just hungry. I want a sandwich."

Jackie cocked her head, smiling wryly. "What kind?"

"The kind with a lot of meat in it. Raw."

Jackie blinked rapidly and Black Star stopped eating, eyes widening. "R-raw? But if you eat it raw, you'll get sick!"

Before Soul could speak, Black Star pounced on him. "Just let 'em have it a little rare, ha! He gets his words confused sometimes, y'know, foreigner and all!" Black Star laughed, slapping a hand over Soul's mouth when he tried to argue. "Maka's mad at him cuz he broke one of her saddles!"

Jackie's eyes lit with understanding. "Ahhh! I understand. You should buy her a new one soon, before her dragon returns. Maka loves that dragon like a son, you know, you have to be more careful if you want a shot with her," she giggled girlishly. Soul glared her away and then muscled out of Black Star's death grip.

"What the hell was that about?"

"Normal humans don't eat \_raw \_meat, idiot!"

Soul scowled but didn't fight it. It was true; he should have known better. "She's wrong. She doesn't love me like a son," he added moodily, the statement adding to his aggravation. He didn't like it, not even in jest. Jackie was wrong, and that entire statement should never exist in the first place. It was simply wrong; Maka was no mother to him, nor was he a son to her. Impossible.

"Eh?"

"I said, she doesn't love me like a son."

"She loves you like something," Black Star shrugged. He slurped down the remaining stew, burping right after. The tavern was alive with the men of their village tonight, and he could already hear the wenches start to file in one by one at the door. He knew Soul would leave after he ate, but he would stay to find himself one. He needed a distraction at night. Sleep did not come easily for him anymore. "She kinda' hates you right now, though."

Black Star shifted his eyes to him when he didn't respond. Soul had his face buried in his arms, slumped over the table while Jackie prepared him one of her famed stacker sandwiches. The Meister placed his bowl on the tabletop, his eyes losing some of their mirth at his friend's misery. "Let her think," he told him. Soul shifted his head to look at him. "Maka gets mad easily, but she doesn't hold grudges. She can't, she's too kind for that. One time," he began, placing his twined hands on the table, "I snuck into her room to steal one of her leg braces. Back then, since we were still in training, we needed leg braces on top of our regular armor, and I thought it'd be hilarious to steal them a day before her combat exam," he grinned here, green

eyes lightening. It was enough to notice the bags under his eyes, as well as the way lines marked his forehead in a way they hadn't before. He had aged so much in just a week. "She was \_pissed. \_I didn't think she'd get so mad since I was gonna' return them to her before her exam. I didn't think it was a big deal, either, it'd only get her two points off her overall grade. But she punched me right here when I told her I took 'em," he pointed to his cheekbone, rubbing it in remembrance. "And I punched her back. We got in a fight and ended up failing our exams because of it. I never thought she'd forgive me for it, since she wanted to get the best scores on everything, and I basically made her fail a huge exam...but she did, after a couple of days. She punched me again and that time I let her," he grinned, scratching the back of his head. "Ever since, she's never actually gotten angry at me again."

"Black Star?'

"Yeah?"

"Are you telling me that I should let Maka punch me?" He deadpanned.

Black Star hummed thoughtfully. "It's worth a shot. The worst she can do is break your jaw!" He laughed at his flat expression, waving his hand to order himself another round of beer. "Just give her some time," he added, more serious. "She'll be back to feeding ya' those sandwiches you love so much. Why \_do \_you like them so much, anyway? Stew is much better."

Soul thanked Jackie when she returned with an extra-big sandwich for him, the meat rare like Black Star had said. It was not raw like he wanted it, but it would suffice for now. "Why do you like doing flips in the air?" he mumbled and his eyes widened when he realized what had just passed his lips. "Uh, I didn't mean toâ€"

"Whatever," Black Star cut him off, holding his glass with both hands. The glass cracked in his hands.

"Black Star, I didn't mean to bring it up like that," Soul sincerely said. "Sorry."

Gradually, Black Star's grip loosened. He did not look at him: he kept his gaze steady on the beer that sloshed within the glass. There was a terrible hole in his chest that had been bothered when Soul said that; raw edges had been snipped with the comment, because he could barely think about his beloved dragon without his eyes burning and vengeance boiling in his veins. He had not spoken about it for days and no one had brought it up. It made the hollow thump in his chest all the easier to ignore.

"That girl I brought back," he began, slowly.

"Tsubaki?" Soul offered, brows furrowing. "What about her?"

"Is she strong?"

"No," Soul answered, carefully. "She's a servant. She's not allowed to train."

"But she can be strong, right?"

"Yes. I suppose she can. Why?"

"I'm gonna' make her my dragon," he stated and Soul nearly choked on his sandwich. "I've been thinking about it for awhile."

"Wh-what? Out of all the dragons you could've chosen, you're choosing her? She doesn't have any formal training, Black Star!" Soul reasoned, grabbing his shoulder so he faced him. "She's never fought like we have!" he cut himself off when he saw his eyes. Soul's hand fell away and deep in his gut, he felt his instinct tell him to get away. There was a bloodthirstiness in his comrades eyes that reminded Soul of the teachings of his tutors, of his brother who warned him that humans were fickle creatures with darkness in their hearts. In Black Star's eyes, he saw blood and pain, but, worst of all, he saw a hunger for vengeance.

"I'll just train her," he told him with a vicious grin. His eyes were wild with expectations and ideas that made Soul's stomach turn.

"She's strong, right? And she's just like you, so she's gotta' be stronger than any of these dragons we have here in the keep! She'll do for what I have in mind."

"You leave her out of this," Soul said, coldly. "She has nothing to do with your quest. She had her own reasons for being there, and you're not going to drag her into it your delusional!" He sucked in a breath when Black Star grabbed him around his collar, shoving him up in his face. Plates clattered with the force of his shove, and Soul felt pain erupt in his lower back from where Black Star slammed him against the table's edge. The rank smell of beer heaved from his mouth, and Black Star's eyes bore into his with a reckless challenge.

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"The hell do you care what happens to her?" he sneered. "You left that life, so why the hell do you care all of a sudden?"

"Because I know what you want to do," he answered, grabbing his fist. His nails became claws that dug into his skin, but Black Star did not flinch. Soul's eyes flashed red. "And I'm not going to let anymore people die because of what I didn't say."

Black Star's lips twisted and he laughed down at him, the sound warbled and cruel. He dropped him back on his chair, kicking it and turning away as Soul scrambled for his footing. He ignored Jackie when she shakily asked him what was wrong, if Black Star was going to be fine, and fisted his hand when his friend boisterously announced his presence to the whores who drank in the back, already wrapping their slender arms around his neck as they greeted him warmly but not without caution.

"Evan?" Jackie asked, frightened. "Evan, what happened? What...?"

"I'll pay for my dinner tomorrow," Soul said instead, giving her a halfhearted smile. "I came with Black Star and, uh..."

"It's fine, it's fine!" She waved off, smiling at him. Sweat beaded her forehead. Soul could smell her fear and it made him ill. "Y-you looked liked you needed it! It's on me."

"Thanks," he mumbled, giving one last long look at Black Star. He would need Kid's help with this, somehow. Maka was out of the question; she could be just as impulsive as Black Star, and she was also angry at him. Kid was the only option right now. Soul was already constructing a plan as he bid goodbye to Jackie and pacified her worry for the blue-haired Meister with a wave, not breathing another word on the subject. He went home after that, ignoring the freezing wind that made his eyes droopy and his breathing hard.

He nearly turned the other way when he remembered that he did not have a key for Maka's home, but when he tried the knob, it gave without protest. He entered slowly, scenting out Maka but not her father. He hadn't returned home yet. The night was already very dark, the stars points of light that brightened the land. If her father had not returned yet, then he would not until daylight. He hoped this did not add to Maka's ire; he could go without another up close and personal encounter with her fist. The one with Black Star tonight was enough.

"...Soul?"

Soul nearly stubbed his toe on the tables edge at the sound. He regained his balance and dared to whisper, "Yes?" When she didn't say anything, he pulled on his sleeping shirt and padded over to Maka. His sheets and blankets were still at their usual place beside her bed, still the mess he had left them in the morning. He took that as a sign that she tolerated him enough to keep him around for another day. He couldn't fall back on Black Star now, not after what happened. "Maka?"

"We're training tomorrow" she mumbled, stubbornly. "Early. No breaks. So go to sleep. I'll wake you up."

He stayed quiet. Training? Well, they had not done that since their fight a week ago. It was a very good sign, and he was not about to test her patience by asking about her sudden change of heart. He dropped down to his nest of blankets, already pulling them up so he could burrow beneath them. He had just buried himself comfortably when he heard her whisper his name again. He listened harder, peeking out of his sheets a little. When she did not say anything else, he sighed to himself and burrowed beneath his sheets again.

If he had looked at her, he would have found her gazing at him from over the edge of her mattress, a sorrow in her eyes that he would not know of until it was far too late.

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><p>There was something wrong with Black Star.</p>

Tsubaki might not have known him as long as others had, but she knew his character enough to know that this was not how he usually acted. But, she thought, who was she to say anything? She had always been a terrible judge of character. Her friends told her she was too trusting, her fellow charges remarked on her guilelessness, and her lords did nothing at all, nothing but look at her with pity in their eyes. But she would swear on her mother's grave that Black Star was not a bad person and this was not how he usually acted. She knew with her heart this was not him. She just knew.

Tsubaki felt that Black Star was not quiet. She had seen such a vivacious and confident man at that clearing, and the man who stood before her now was not the same one she had last seen. He was somber and held a haunting gaze that seared into her soul and made her bow her head, because there was a part of her that felt guilt and fault. If she had not been at that clearing, if Mifune had not recognized her as someone from the royal house, he would still be alive. Black Star seemed to know it was her fault, too, because he was only like this when he came into her room. She heard his loud laughter and booming voice echo down the hall to her room every time he arrived, but once inside her room, he would be cold and devoid of anything.

He came in every morning, noon, and evening to refill her glass with water and bring her something to eat. He would usually leave after, not sparing her another glance, and close the door behind him along with his haunted gaze. The laughter would continue outside.

But tonight she stopped him by grabbing hold of his wrist. She flinched when he tore it away and burned her with dark eyes.

"He must have meant a lot to you," she began, softly. "Mifune was his name, wasn't it?"

"He was my comrade," he told her tightly.

"He died honorably, saving your life," she managed a little smile at him when he looked at her, his fists clenching by his sides. She had a sinking feeling she was making things worse and she flustered, swallowing and pressing her hands to her bandaged chest. "I-I think he knew it, too. He protected you from them. If he hadn't, you would have dieâ€"!"

"\_I \_should have been the one to die back there," Black Star cut her off. "That bastard knew it, too. But he chose to save me instead of letting me save him, like it was supposed to go," he barked out a laugh, shaking off her worried look so he could turn towards the door. "He stole my thunder, that old lizard. How the hell am I supposed to show up something like\_ that?\_"

Tsubaki was at a loss for words, staring at his backside.

"I...um..."

"He was amazing, even up to his last moments," she could hear the smile in his words and she wanted to see it, to see if it was true and not forced like it had been back in that slaughter field. "He knew it, too. I knew that old lizard was just looking for a time and place to show me up."

"Black Star, you..." But she paused, studied his lighter eyes when he turned to face her. She chose her words carefully, "You're very brave."

"Brave?" He laughed suddenly, setting his hands on his waist. "I'm a fuckin' \_warrior, \_one of the best, actually! Something like this isn't gonna' bring me down, so quit looking at me like that!" He pointed at her face, grinning crookedly when she flustered. "I'm fine! Mifune was my comrade, and I'll avenge him! I'll find that clusterfuck of a hoard and kill \_all\_ of them," his grin became

vicious, his eyes revealing a blood-lust that made her fist her sheets. They frightened her. He reeked of something she only sensed in the mad. "I swore I would, and a Star clan member never breaks an oath!"

"B-but how will you kill them if you've lost your comrade?" Tsubaki asked timidly, shrinking when the shadows in his eyes disappeared and his grin returned, brighter than ever.

"Easy! I'll use you!"

"M-me?"

"Yeah! You're a dragon, too, right? Like Soul?" He crossed his arms over his chest, grinning down at her. Tsubaki was unable to look away; he had an ability to capture people in those expressive eyes of his. Green eyes, she realized, they were such a fair shade of green she was stunned.

"W-well, yes, I am, butâ€"!"

"Good! Then when you're all better, I'll take you to the field so we can begin training! I don't know if you're into the leash or not. Soul is, but he's a weird guy and into that kind of thing with Maka soâ€"!"

"I can't be your dragon!" Tsubaki blurted, cutting Black Star off mid-sentence. She looked down, unable to meet his blank look, and fiddled with her sheets. "I...I mean, I can't. I serve my gracious King and to become your companion wouldâ€"!"

"No, you don't," he winked at her when she looked up, mouth parted. "You're all the way over here, and they're all the way over there! You even said it yourself, you're just a servant and they'd replace you the instant they could. Coz that's what servants are, but you're more than that. You're Star material," he smirked. "You're worthy enough to become my dragon."

Tsubaki felt her cheeks warm, touched by his words. She was loyal to her King, but she did need a strong warrior in order to find Soul's brother and bring him back to her homeland. Black Star was more than just a strong warrior. Surely her fair King would forgive her for this trespass, if it aided to bring his son home? However, there still remained a problem. "I'm...I'm not suited for combat, Black Star. I don't know a single thing about fighting. I'll only hold you back if you use me..."

"That's what a comrade is for," Black Star told her easily. "I'll help you. We'll help each other, coz that's what comrades do. I'll teach you and you'll be the best on the field. Mifune and I were supposed to be legends," he looked down as he said this, his grin fading and the dullness returning to his eyes again. When he looked up, he wore that brave face of happiness. "So? You'll be my dragon, right? You'll help me with this?"

Tsubaki smiled, unwilling to like her new servitude to the warrior but unable to help it. "I will. I promise to do my best!"

He grinned, giving her a thumbs ups. "Fantastic! People are going to write songs about us, just wait!" He grabbed the knob of the door but

paused, looking over his shoulder. His grin was gone, his eyes holding hers gravely. "And I won't let anything happen to you. Stay behind me always, Tsubaki."

"I will," she swore softly.

"Good! I gotta' go tell Maka and Kid the good news!" He beamed and left her room, the door slamming shut. His footsteps faded, his voice stopped bouncing off the walls. In fact, she heard nothing as he left. There was no laughter outside of these walls that kept her captive. Tsubaki looked back at the plate of food he left behind. She was good at staying behind of people. She was good at obeying, too, because she was raised to do so. Her family had sold her when she was very young so being passed from house to house, lord to lord, was not new to Tsubaki.

Black Star, however, made the thought of being left behind again difficult.

"He's not bad," she told herself softly. "He's..." She looked at the door again and smiled sadly, turning over in her bed and burying her nose into her hands. "He's so loyal."

They were wrong: her friends, her charges, her lords.

She was not a terrible judge of character, she was simply too terribly kind.

## 9. Chapter 9

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by. <strong>Poisoned Scarlett

The sun was setting in a stream of vivid pinks and oranges but he did not lift himself off the crag he had perched on. He waited patiently and without complaint, even as the sky became darker with nightfall and began to fill with a swarm of glistening stars. In fact, he allowed himself a moment to marvel them as he awaited her arrival. He did not wait long, however: she arrived silently, as if she stepped out of the shadows themselves, her black silk dress dragging over the rocks as she hiked up the mountain. He could have been kinder and had their rendezvous point at a closer location, could have even gone to her, but Asura was past all kindness and sentimentality at his age. He had a goal in mind, and it was high time the witch paid her dues to him and gave him what he wanted. He had waited far too long as it was.

"You're looking as handsome as ever, Assiah," Witch Arachne drawled, hiking the skirts of her dress up shapely legs before she perched herself on a nearby rock. She crossed her leg over the other and smiled guilelessly at him. "Or shall I call you Asura? I hear the neighboring villages are quite taken with that name."

"I care little what you call me," he replied crisply. Witch Arachne hummed curiously, her outlined eyes crinkling with a smile. He paid little heed to her amusement; witches were fickle, and more often than not amused by the most macabre things. "I assume you know why I summoned you here tonight."

"A favor," Witch Arachne purred. She held out a finger. "But just one, Asura. Be wise with your words."

"I need the location of Viseryus," Asura asked without hesitation. He needed his location as soon as possible if the next phase of his plan were to be executed in a timely manner. "Preferably within the next thirty seconds."

"Viseryus?" Witch Arachne pondered the name, letting it roll off her tongue a few more times. "Oh! You mean Wesley?"

"...Wesley?"

"The famed violinist of the east," she fanned herself with an impish smile, her smokey eyes crinkling when she saw she had Asura's attention now. That was very good; perhaps she would be able to employ her plan much sooner than she thought. "He is said to have an angel's hands, for his music is the sweetest to ever be heard..."

"Tell me where he is."

"I already did," she innocently replied. "Debt repaid."

His eyes flashed and she held out her fan with that same smile when he snarled, the fire stalled by her bewitched fan. She flicked it to the right and the fire burned a nearby tree. Dragon fire burned hotter and brighter than normal fire, so she was not surprised when more trees caught aflame and crumbled under the heat, nor when the rocks burned and turned to ash beneath the inferno. "Temper, temper. I always took you as a calm man, Asura."

"I have no time to be playing a game of wit with a witch," he hissed. His eyes became red like blood and Witch Arachne hummed again. Vhalgaryus, or Soul as he went by now, had been born with the same kind of eyes, eyes as strong as the end of a blacksmiths hammer, eyes as bright and full of life as the blood that poured from a man's wound. "Where is he?"

"I owe you one favor of my own choosing, which I have already repaid by telling you of his location. I did not have to be specific, that was not part of our agreement," Witch Arachne told him frankly. "But I am grateful that you covered my tracks when your King ordered for my execution. Because you have been such a darling in keeping me out of your graces' sight," she said this with a sweet smile that made him want to claw her eyes out, "I shall grant you another favor. However, I ask for something in return..."

"Witch, I wouldn't be making bargains in the face of a dragon."

"Dragon, I wouldn't be making threats in the face of a witch," she threw back with equal viciousness, her eyes flashing with a web of violet. He could feel darkness within her and he resisted the urge to step away. Witches were vile things; they were evil incarnate, but dragons were fire made into flesh and he did not fear her as others would. If he were being honest with himself, he had the advantage. He had his King's guards at his beck and call. He only needed to say the word and the witch would become ash beneath his claws. "What I would be giving to you would be two-in-one, you see, for Wesley is not

alone in this venture, and you would need \_both\_ of what I am about to tell you for you to succeed."

"Both?" Asura echoed, cautiously.

"Yes, both," she said earnestly. She closed her fan with a flick of her wrist and pointed it at him, "I shall give you what you desire, but in return you must allow me to sample some of your blood."

"My blood? I'm not of direct royal lineage. However, I \_could\_ bring you an entire jug of royal blood," he darkly promised. "Should you have the time to spare."

Witch Arachne was touched, but not enough to consider it. "No, no. Yours will do. I just need a sample."

Asura considered her for a moment. "Why do you require my blood, witch?"

"Well, you said it yourself, I am a witch and my curiosity for your kind knows no bounds. Worry not for any bloodwork I may cast upon you, I have no interest in getting rid of you, or harming you. You're very useful to me," she said truthfully, brushing her long black hair off her cheek. He studied her for any deceit and found none, could not even scent it. "I simply require dragon blood as a starting ingredient."

"I don't believe you."

"You might not, but those are my terms. Take it or leave it," Witch Arachne told him offhandedly. "But remember this: you will not meet another witch as kind as me. My sisters consider your kind threats, they won't ever help you as I have." Her eyes were cold, and her body felt colder. He could scent no life in her, could sense nothing warm or anything particularly \_human\_. She was something else altogether: not living or dead, for she had sold her life for something greater, as all witches eventually did. But what she said was true: he would not meet another witch like her, and killing her was not an option. It would disadvantage him greatly if he did. He did not like being played around with like this, but he needed to do what needed to be done.

"I will kill you if you misuse my blood."

"Do you agree with my terms?" Witch Arachne said instead.

"I do."

She hid a vicious grin behind her fan. "Excellent. Wesley resides in the marshes of the olden towns in the east, near the tree twice a big as the others."

"And?"

"Hm?"

"You said you were giving me two in one."

"Nothing ever escapes you, does it?" Witch Arachne told him with a simple smile. "His \_wife\_ also resides there with him. And, their

child as well...the new heir to the throne, if Wesley decides to return to take his lord father's place," she trailed off, noting the look of shock that crossed the elder dragons face. She let her eyes trail down to his arm and she stood, fanning herself again. "And now my sample? If you will?"

Asura watched her approach him silently. He dug his claws into the earth when she drew too near but she did not stop. Asura was fiercer than any other dragon she had come across, with red markings that trailed down his back like the bones of a skeleton. He was intimidating, and his color spoke of destruction and ash. He was an elder dragon by the way he kept his form so easily, and he spoke without needing to be in his human flesh. Witch Arachne rather liked him in his human flesh, however: he was more interesting to look at as a human, although as a dragon he was simply fascinating. She sliced a small cut into the tender skin of his underarm and took her sample without another word, slipping the vial between her bountiful breasts and smiling at him pleasantly.

"I should warn you about the marshes," she added just as Asura was about to leave. "They're wrought with Maiden's Woe. Clever man, isn't he, that Wesley? He's always been the smartest brother...unlike his younger sibling. Such a shame he had to die so young," Arachne crossed her arms over chest as Asura paused, watching her with blank eyes. "I hear he was the only one in over thirty years to be born dragon, not human. I would have loved to study him," she smiled twistedly.

Asura wrinkled his nose. "Vhalgaryus was a fool to have run from his home. He did not deserve the throne, but even he doesn't deserve to be cut open by your hands, witch."

"So touchy," Witch Arachne cooed, her eyes crinkling. "For someone who just gave me their blood for me to play with."

"Get out of my sight," Asura sneered. He had other things to take care of; not banter with a forsaken witch. Arachne deserved the solitude of the mountains for what she had done to his kind, her own kind. She was twisted, but she was also powerful.

And now he knew where the eldest, and the last, brother of his beloved king resided in. Soon he and his spawn would also see the same demise the youngest had, and Asura would then continue onto his next phase. But Arachne was right in one sense: Wes had always been the smarter brother. Maidens Woe was an herb that could incapacitate a dragon for hours on end and to surrounded himself with it, in his human guise, was a brilliant way to keep himself hidden. Dragons were sensitive to the herb due to their heightened noses, and some of the younger dragons could actually die if they inhaled too much of it. For someone of his caliber and age, the herb would only weaken him but not bring him down. However, it was an advantage to know what lied ahead.

Asura took to the sky, a massive jump that had Witch Arachne thinking he could fly after all. But he disappeared through the thatch of trees soon after, and she did not even hear when he landed on the ground.

The witch took out the vial of blood and cradled it in her palms, violet eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Now I just need your bones as well, Asura," she grinned, madly. "And then, I can take the dragon-born as well."

But all good things came to those who waited.

\* \* \*

><p>Kid was particular about who he trained with. In the past, he had no problem going up against Maka's dragon in the fields. However, as said dragon approached him in his human guise, Kid wanted nothing to do with him. He would not mind having his own dragon slamming the man into the ground a few times, actually. He remained civil, despite his desire to warn him against tempting Maka in such a way, and nodded his head in greeting when Soul waved his hand.</p>

"Kid."

"Evan...or would you rather be called Soul?"

"Soul is fine," he said. "Just not around the locals."

"Noted."

Soul decided to be quick about this. Kid had been training with his own team and the looks they gave him were not friendly in the least. Although Soul would have preferred to take Kid aside when he was actually alone, he had no choice but to do it while he was training. Maka was not home at the moment, likely bonding with that half-breed at the keep still, and although Soul wanted nothing more than to follow her to ensure that little minx didn't go captivating his Meister, he needed to speak of some serious matters with Kid. "I have something I need to speak to you about. In private."

"Good, I have something as well. You have good timing," Kid told him with a lift of his lip. Soul was barely moved: he only stepped aside to let the Meister lead the way. "It has come to my attention that you and Maka are spending quite a lot of time together," Kid began once they were away from the field. "I don't mean you training with her, I mean you in general."

"She's my master," Soul told him flatly. "I follow her wherever she goes because it is my duty to protect her."

"She can take care of herself."

"I'm aware of that."

"Then you are not needed wherever she is."

"She may be more than capable of protecting herself, however it is difficult to quiet a hundred years of instinct."

"Instinct?"

Soul grunted. After a second of holding his expecting gaze, he mumbled: "I feel instinctively compelled to protect her, or at least know that she's safe."

"How do you know she's safe now?" Kid challenged, stopping.

"I can sense her," Soul replied calmly. "She's in the Keep with the infant dragons. Stein is there as well, and I trust him to keep her safe should anything happen."

"Do you trust me?"

"No."

Kid's eyes flickered but before he could respond, Soul said: "I don't trust you with her, if that's what you mean. I don't trust most humans with Maka, don't take it personally. Humans happen to have a bad reputation in my lands, and from what I've seen I have reason to believe the tales. I might've spared against you when I was dragon, but I still don't like you."

"I've known Maka nearly my entire life. You've only known her for a few years, that gives you no right to decide who she speaks to or!"

"I never said that," Soul hissed. His eyes flashed red and Kid's hand automatically went to his sword. "Don't misunderstand me. Maka can do what she pleases, I have absolutely no control over that. That doesn't mean I have to feel at ease with who she interacts with. I trust my master's judgement, but you can't stand there and tell me that Maka doesn't get carried away sometimes."

Kid wanted to refute him, but he knew he was right. Maka had the exceptional gift of friend-making because of her compassionate nature, but often times the friends she made were not in her best interests. Although she could protect herself just fine, Kid understood where Soul was coming from: Maka could be emotionally vulnerable, especially when she empathized. Once she formed a bond, there was no stopping Maka from helping them to the best she could. It was a wonderful gift, to have such a warm and golden heart, but it often left her open to attack.

"You don't trust me, I don't trust you. Can we put this behind us for a second? There's something more important right now than who has Maka's best interests at heart," Soul spoke up, interrupting his thoughts. "It's about Black Star."

"Black Star?" Kid furrowed his brow. "What about him?"

"He's going to make Tsubaki his dragon."

Kid stared at him for a moment, then incredulously said:  
"What?"

Soul sighed. "That's exactly what I said when he told me. I wouldn't...have an issue with him taking her in as his dragon, considering she'd probably live a better life with him than...at the castle," he added carefully, avoiding his inquisitive look to continue, "but he wants to use her to get revenge on the dragons that slayed Mifune."

"Black Star knows better than to become victim to revenge."

"Apparently not, since he told me himself," Soul stated, holding Kid's eyes. "He reeks of bloodlust."

"Reeks?" Kid folded his arms over his chest. "Is that another one of your skills, beast? To sense, or rather \_smell\_, such things?"

"Yes, and if you don't believe me, I can tell you now, you need a \_bath\_," he smirked.

Kid pursed his lips. "I've known Black Star longer than you have. There is no way he would let himself be swayed by vengeance."

"He's not being swayed by it," Soul shrugged. "He's seeking it out. I can't be near him without smelling bloodlust. Makes me sick."

"Tsubaki can sense these things as well, can she?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"Then she won't partner with him if he reeks of bloodlust, as you say," Kid said, logically. "She is the King's servant, she would know better, yes?"

"...Yes," he said, carefully. "But if Black Star forces her toâ€"!"

"I'll talk to him and verify this myself," Kid cut him off. His tone softened with his next words, "I am glad for your concern over Black Star. He...speaks highly of you, sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"He says you have a strange fixation with Maka's leash and, Soul, if this turns out to be a \_problem\_, I'llâ€"!"

"I \_do not\_ \_have\_ a fixation with her leash!" Soul snapped, feeling his cheeks warm. "She hasn't even used it in forever! She trusts me not to go biting every asshole's head off!"

"She does," Kid mused, pausing to gather his thoughts for a moment. "She's angry with you still, correct?"

"Yeah," he sighed, not hiding the way his shoulders slumped. He avoided Kid's eyes by shifting his weight to his right foot, turning away from him as if something in the distance had caught his attention. "I'm working on it. I'm giving her time to cool off. I know it was wrong of me not to have told her, but it hadn't mattered much at the time..."

"Didn't it ever bother you that your uncle tried to \_murder\_ you?"

Soul dropped his eyes to the floor. \_Of course\_ it had always bothered him. He was his uncle. He had trusted him. But he also had a duty to Maka, and he could do nothing about his uncle. To return home and plead for his father's mercy would have only put him in an even worse position than he was already in. He was already his father's least favorite child, and no one would believe that his uncle would ever do such a terrible thing to his lord father's offspring, however

unfavored he was. Soul could only rely on his brother and, even then, his brother would have his doubts. Not to mention that if he did pursue the issue enough, there would be only one way to resolve it, and Soul felt his stomach roll at he thought. If his uncle tried to kill him once, he would have no trouble doing it again and in a more legal way. He had witnessed his first death match when he was ten; he had seen his brother go head-to-head with one of his cousins when he was fourteen, and had watched his brother rip his cousins throat out in one fell swoop and be crowned a warrior.

"If I were strong enough to do something about it, I would have, Kid," Soul told him softly. "Humans and dragons differ in a lot of ways. One way is our politics, and how we handle our disagreements is a lot different than how you handle yours. There's no counsel meeting for us; we don't talk things out to reach a compromise like you humans do. Growing up, I've only seen my father talk things out two times, and they had been with my mother."

"What do you do then?" Kid had a feeling he already knew.

"We fight, and we either die or we win. There is no in between."

"Your father must be very strong to have such a large area of land," Kid carefully said.

"My father was one of the strongest our kind has ever known. He decimated over four villages in one day and wiped out nearly all of the dragons who had made Mount Grimm their home the next, and made himself King of the land by nightfall with a hoard of followers at his feet," Soul told him stonily. Kid felt his stomach drop, and a cold realization seeped into his bones. The dragon who had wiped away so many of the western villages nearly seventy years ago in a rain of hellfire, who had instilled so much terror and anguish into his people, and who had become the symbol of their rebellion against the beasts who prowled the outskirts of their own town. That dragon, Kid realized, that dragon had been...

Soul had the decency to look down as he said, "My father was Balerion, otherwise known as the Black Dread. The dragon that started this war between us."

Kid rushed at him and Soul did not stop him, only grimacing when Kid slammed him up against a wall and hissed in his face, "Why in the hell should I even help the offspring of the dragon who nearly wiped our kind away seventy years ago? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now, you bastard!"

"Because my brother is next in line for the throne, and if you can forge an alliance with him, your people will never have to fear dragons ever again!" Soul grunted, holding his eyes. "But if you kill me now, you won't have that advantage, and he'll wipe you all out, too. If you can't handle my uncle, what makes you think you'll be able to handle The Black Dread?" he sneered and cut down his snide tone when Kid thrashed him against the wall. "I'm not lying! My brother will do it. He's been wanting peace between us for a long time! He doesn't like fighting, he's always said it's ridiculous to be warring over a specie that could help us live better!"

"Your brother," Kid began, studying him for deceit. "Where is

he?"

"According to Tsubaki, somewhere in the east. If we can convince him to take my father's place again, that treaty is basically yours."

"If we don't?"

Soul swallowed. "You're going to see a whole lot of dragons you've never seen before invade here. The scripts surrounding the mountain are what keep them out in the first place. My mother put them up initially to keep anymore bloodshed from happening. We didn't want to deal with your kind; we just wanted the land."

"You killed all of those people for \_land?\_"

"That's my pops for you, he's insane," Soul deadpanned. Soul sighed at Kid's warning look. "That's the only thing he ever told me when I asked. But I'm pretty sure he's hiding something in that mountain, I just don't know what."

Kid finally let him go, steadying him by his shoulder. He ran his fingers through his hair after Soul had his footing. "Does anyone else know about this?"

"No. Just you. I figured if there was one person who ought to know, it would be you."

Kid gave him a measured look. "You planned this."

Soul did not look the least bit abashed. "Spirit's hotheaded, he would've started something and it would've ended in blood. Not ours," Soul hinted. Kid inhaled deeply, wanting to refute him but knowing better. Spirit, for all his strategic genius, was one of the most reckless and irresponsible Chief's their village had ever instated. "You're the commander for the Meister's, and Maka tells me you're one of the smartest people here," he smirked a little when Kid nodded without hesitation. "You can figure something out, right?"

"Of course I can. We'll take this one step at a time," Kid told him smoothly. "But first, considering our situation, it would do us no good to keep our hostilities against one another. There are bigger matters at stake than petty resentment." He held his hand out, eyes a lot more friendly now. Soul could still read some mistrust, but it was better than nothing. "Commander Kid."

Soul eyed his hand, then took it. Kid had a very firm grip.  
"Soul...Evans."

Kid smirked. "Soul Evans. You will come back to me when you have any further information regarding this subject, and will adhere to my orders even if Chief Albarn says otherwise."

"That's a little, uh, forward, isn't it?"

"Spirit is a good Chief," Kid said crisply. "However, the Commander has a say in what goes and what doesn't. Spirit has very little power over me when I decide on a matter, and I am sure Maka will do her part in keeping her father out of our way until we settle this

business. I will handle Spirit after we locate your brother."

"Sounds good to me," Soul shrugged.

"Excellent. Your first task is to rewrite the scrips in your father's land. I shall send Black Star to locate your brother. He will fail," Kid said, certainly, to which Soul nearly rubbed his eyes out at, "and you will aid him, and not fail," he held his gaze as he said this. "I will give you further orders before you leave."

Soul nodded slowly, at ease to know that Kid was actually very fitted for his role as Commander. "And Maka?"

"Tell her what you told me when you are well away from here," Kid told him. "Tell her I made this order. I...will handle her when you both return." Finally, his stony mask broke and he cringed. "She's going to be furious at both of us, you know this, right?"

Soul was already glaring holes at the floor. "You don't gotta' tell me twice. You're better off than me; she's already pissed at me for what happened with Tsubaki!"

"Think about it this way," Kid half-smiled, gesturing back down the path that would lead to the training fields, "She cares about us too much to kill us."

Soul was pale. "That's...not comforting."

Kid only smiled.

\* \* \*

><p>Spirit looked between his beloved daughter and her beast of a dragon-made-human with wary eyes. They were not facing each other: in fact, Soul looked like he was brooding with the way his hands were shoved in his pockets and Maka was just plain irritated, her hands on her hips and her lip twisted in displeasure. If he were to be truly honest with himself, he would not let them go on this mission at all. However, the girl Black Star had brought over insisted that her kingdom's scripts needed to be rewritten, and Soul was currently the only one capable of doing that—at least until they found his brother from wherever he was. It did not help that Kid backed this up with a fervor Spirit had not seen in ages, and as Commander, his word was worth more than some beasts. Not only that, but Kid had proposed a rather <em>enlightening</em> option for retrieving the missing heir of the land of Grimm.

However, that did not mean that the thought of two Soul's didn't make his head ache. But his daughter insisted that they assist the girl and Kid had practically arranged the next phases of their plan in less time than it took him to get drunk.

Kid was the one who proposed Maka and Soul go and fix the lands magical scripts. Maka insisted she was ready for the mission when he returned home, and Spirit had caved under his daughter's fierce gaze. But, now, he was second-guessing himself.

"Are you two sure you're in the proper condition to be heading out?"

"YES, papa," Maka snapped. She only glanced at Soul, her lips pursing even more. "I can handle this. Soul can, too, we just have to go!"

"You already know the plan, right?"

"Black Star will fetch Soul's brother while we repair the broken-down scripts in Mount Grimm," Maka told him shortly. "Then we will reconvene here and await further instruction. Kid will stay here to ensure the Asura doesn't attack."

"Right."

"Papa, one thing remains unclear for me," Maka said suddenly, looking at him. "Will we bring Soul's brother here or...back to the mountains?"

Soul cast her a quick look, then looked at Spirit.

Spirit kept his smile light. "Don't worry about that right now, sweetheart, we've got everything handled! Now, hurry up! You're late, and Kid will throw a fit if he still finds you two here! Do you have everything packed up, honey?"

"Ah...yeah..." Maka said uncertainly, squeezing the straps to her bag. "Right." She watched Soul turn heel and go outside. By the time she met up with him, he had already transformed into his other-half, and his wings unfolded to stretch out a little before they folded back neatly. Maka waved her father goodbye, and grabbed her saddle and reigns. She made sure to strap it on him loosely so he was not uncomfortable before hopping on herself. "Soul, let's go!" she ordered, and he took off with a plume of snow.

Spirit watched them go with hard eyes. "Kid, you better be right," he murmured to himself. He was trusting Kid's word that holding Soul's brother hostage in order to arrange an agreement between the King and their lands would work. If the man was their only heir and only way to stop Asura from taking the throne for himself, as Stein had advised him, then they had no other choice.

Spirit hoped his daughter would forgive him, but Soul would be the first to die in order to ensure another reign of terror did not happen again.

## 10. Chapter 10

\*\*How to Train Your Soul  
>by.<strong> \_Poisoned Scarlett\_

"Alright! Now that you're all better, get into\_ these!" Black Star held out a heavy coil of chains along with what Tsubaki saw was a whip of some sort, his grin bright and easy. She felt her face warm in embarrassment and she pressed her hands to her chest to stop fidgeting. They used whips to subdue dragons? It was an odd thing to do, but not wholly bad. Tsubaki couldn't help but think that whips were a lot more compassionate than what they, themselves, used, which was fire and rage and brute strength.

"What is that and why do I need to wear it?"

Black Star cocked his head. "It's a harness. What'd you think it was?" The training grounds were covered in snow and empty. Soul and Maka had already left for their mission a few days ago and would no doubt be back soon. Black Star never underestimated Maka's determination: she had made Tsubaki a promise to fix her lands magical scripts before she left and she would bring her promise to truth as soon as she could. And now that Black Star had officially taken Tsubaki as his dragon, he would begin a very rushed training regiment in order to prepare for the mission Spirit had for him. But, first, he needed to get Tsubaki saddled and comfortable with the idea of defensive fighting. They would try frontal attacks later, for now he needed to make sure she at least knew how to defend herself both on her own and when he was with her.

"If we're gonna' work together you have'ta wear these! How else am I gonna' hold onto you while we fly?" He laughed loudly. Tsubaki's face reddened; she should have known that! Not whips, but a harness! It was obvious; it was not like she was that ignorant to the idea of humans riding dragons. She had seen it once herself. "I mean, Maka can do it without a saddle coz of Soul's huge wings, but you're a lot more skinny, kinda' like a snake, so it's easy to saddle you. If I didn't, it'd be really hard to hold onto you mid-fight."

"A...snake?"

"Yeah, so you'd be perfect for ambush," he smirked. He shook the harness again. "But first, we gotta' work on your defense moves. I gotta' be sure you know what to do when we get attacked."

"When?"

Black Star grinned, madly she would say. "Oh, yeah. We ain't cowards! We're gonna' wipe all those dragons out, but I need to be sure you can defend yourself first. So, c'mon, transform so I can harness you up! Then we'll go to Stein so he can fit you with a proper saddle. After that, we'll start our training."

"But..." Tsubaki shifted, tugging at the ends of her long hair. Although what Black Star said was logical, wasn't it too little time to train? From what she'd heard from Stein and Kim, most others trained with their dragons for years before they were able to go out into the field. Tsubaki knew they only had a few more days to spare before they needed to leave to find Soul's brother. So she was a little confused as to how they were going to pull this off with only a few days training under their belts. "Do we have enough time to train?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Most of your training will take place out on the field!"

"Out...on the field? Wait, you don't mean we're going out there without any training, do you?!"

He snorted, waving her concerns off. "Of course not! I'm gonna' teach you some defensive moves these next couple of days, then I'll teach ya' how to fight back once we've got a willing

competitor."

"By competitor, you mean a-a rogue dragon?" At his enthusiastic nod, Tsubaki felt herself become sick with fear. She was not built for fighting, for violence. She liked to study languages and serve her beloved king, not allow someone to master her and fly into the mouth of danger!

"Hey, I said I'd protect you, remember?"

Tsubaki snapped her head up, staring into firm green eyes.

"I keep my promises," he told her solemnly. "I'm gonna' teach you how to defend yourself and when we're out there, if anything goes wrong, you leave, ya' hear me? You \_leave\_ me behind."

"But...but then you'll..."

"Trust me, I'd have a better chance beating some snot-faced dragon on my own than with you. You'd only drag me down if you're there," he told her simply, but cruelly. Tsubaki felt her heart clench and her eyes sting with tears at being waved off so easily. Although the fear she felt was real, there was a bubbling determination to prove him \_wrong\_ and show him that she really could be useful to him. "Panic is deadly," he added, suddenly, "and if you panic out there, you'd get us both killed." He gave her a longer look before he said, "But if you don't panic and you \_fight\_ your fear and attack with me, we'd have a better chance at eliminating all the targets. We can win if you fight your fear," he smiled when she looked up, curious cerulean eyes trained on his. "You with me?"

Tsubaki nodded. She wiped away any stray tears and stood straight.  
"Yes!"

"Good! Transform, then, before anyone see's ya! Then we can get started!"

When she transformed, Tsubaki told herself that she would be able to do it after all. Because there was something widely inspiring about Black Star, something that made her want to fight instead of cower. She wanted to see where this new-found determination would take her, so she allowed him to slip the harness on her and lead her to Keeper Stein, who only smiled at both of them and led them both into the dark cave to secure her with a saddle.

\* \* \*

><p>"Dive down, Soul," Maka hollered, squinting her eyes against the wind. She aligned her body against his and spotted an opening of clouds up ahead. "I want to see where we are."</p>

Soul obliged, losing altitude slowly because he had learned while flying with Maka that suddenly dropping various hundreds feet was \_very\_ bad for his Master's health. Once Maka had a clear view of where they were, she gently patted his side and Soul flew back above the clouds, keeping even with them as Maka made herself comfortable in the nook between his great wings.

\_Papa is definitely hiding something from me, \_Maka thought,  
troubled. She pulled the collar of her coat higher up her neck. She

absolutely hated being lied to and it seemed that everyone was doing it to her nowadays. Her father, Kid, Black Star...\_Soul\_. They all lied to her because of what? Mistrust? Hesitance? Forgetfulness? Maka couldn't understand why she was being excluded from everything when she had proven herself trustworthy and adept at her job time and time again. Was she that easily forgotten, was there something about her that just made people hesitate to tell her things? It frustrated her to think the person whom she least expected to be lied to from, Soul, had also kept such heavy things from her. He had lied straight to her face when she asked about his past. He lied without flinching, without an ounce of remorse.

\_Does he not trust me? \_Maka thought. She looked down at her dragon, how he flew without a weight on his shoulders. \_Soul....

Soul suddenly reared and Maka clutched his neck tightly. "Wh-what is, Soul, do you see something?"

He huffed and his breath came out as a warning.

Monstrous Nightmares was a fitting name for the specie of dragon. Even Soul held some resentment towards them, for their aggressiveness and the way they tore into each other like they were prey and not blood. Although three of them was a stretch, even for them, Soul was confident that Maka and he would be able to deal with them. If they could just spread them out enough, they could take them down one by one without any major injuries.

"We're taking that one out first, the one to the right!" Maka shouted over the wind, following his train of thought. "Curve around him, we have to bait him to follow us!"

Soul did as he was told and then some: Maka kept her head low, on high alert as the Monstrous Nightmare roared at Soul and tried to tackle into him. Soul swiftly dodged, leading him deeper into the forest while the other two tried to follow. Soul took that Monstrous Nightmare down just as swiftly as he had dodged it, leaving it unconscious on the ground while the other two broke through the wall of forest. Soul's tail whipped around him, ready. The next attack Maka orchestrated, not as smoothly as she wanted, but her tactics had the enemy dragon crushed against a tree with his neck at an odd angle. Her strategy worked even if Soul growled at her for her rough handling afterwards.

The third one had them in a tussle.

Soul wanted to go in one direction, Maka the other, and her hissing orders into his ear and him growling back nonsensical arguments only left them open. That Monstrous Nightmare was quicker than his two brethren, attacked using sharp strikes rather than bowling into them. This dragon was a tougher kill and the fact that they couldn't decide on what tactic to take it down with made things worse.

"What are you \_doing?\_ We talked about this! We're going for an aerialâ€œoof!" Maka nearly slipped off his back when he made a sharp turn. She lunged up and growled in his ear, \_"If you do that one more time I am going to \*\*hit\*\* you, Soul! That wasn't funny!" \_She cursed when Soul braked to a stop too late and the dragon clashed into the Monstrous Nightmare with his claws. Their scales screeched against each other, their claws sparking as if two swords had parried, and

then Soul was back in the air, glaring down at the dragon who waited for them with a predatory grace.

"Soul!"

He grunted.

She knew what he wanted to do but it was hasty, he had to know that! Soul was not stupid!

"That won't work! We can't do that attack and you \_know \_why!"

Soul tilted his head, meeting her eyes confidently. A second passed before she reluctantly agreed with his tactic. She hesitated for a moment then steeled herself, deciding to trust his instinct even though her's said otherwise. She had been feeling hesitant since they took off from their village. She wanted to try for a more fail-safe approach than a risk like they usually did. She trusted her dragons instinct, butâ€"

"Oh," Maka gasped, stomach plunging.

She'd missed her jump point.

She could feel Soul grow rigid beneath her, trying to stop his dangerously fast assault.

\_I-I can't move, \_Maka froze, staring at the gaping jaws of the Monstrous Nightmare. \_I..I'm not going to make it. \_She was frozen on the back of her dragon and heading right for that beasts' yawning mouth, rows upon rows of serrated teeth just waiting to crunch into her bones. \_This is it.\_

Soul roared, knowing she had no time to escape. Maka needed to leap off so he could strike him with his tail. It was a maneuver they had perfected over the years: she would leap off his back keep running straight as he blocked and attacked, and while he was low on the ground she would jump back on his back using his wing as leverage. This also gave her a good range to throw her axe and finish off the enemy dragon. They had perfected it after many hurtful falls, after many grueling months.

Soul roared for the last time, distressed, and Maka shakily lifted herself up to her knees. It was much too late to jump off now: Soul was going too fast. The fall would break her bones if she did it now. She would die either way, either from the impact of her fall or by the jaws of a dragon.

Before Maka could jump anyway, Soul suddenly dove upward, knocking her off his back. Maka only saw a flash of white. She sucked back a cry when she felt nothing but air beneath her, then cried out when she felt Soul wrap his human arms around her waist. He kept her against his chest and she felt the impact even though Soul was the one who crashed into the dragons nose. She went flying to the right and would have hit the ground with bones splitting through her skin had Soul's soft underbelly not suddenly cushioned her fall. Maka opened her eyes and felt tears well in them.

He'd transformed mid-flight to grab her and cushion her fall.

But felt something wet on her face.

Maka reached up and saw it was blood.

"N-no," she gasped, raising watering eyes. "\_SOUL!" \_she shrieked shrilly.

His neck was caught in the Monstrous Nightmares jaws and she saw his blood run in streams from where the dragons teeth had sunk into the softness of Soul's neck. Soul kept her against him with his clawed palm, but she knew she needed to get away or else she would lose him. And she could not lose him, she realized with a grave certainty, she could not lose him. Not like this, not ever. Soul was her dragon, her partner, her best friend, and she would not lose him over a few secrets.

"SOUL!" She screamed, reaching behind her for her battle ax. Soul's eyes widened when she slid down his belly, landing on her feet. He watched her bring her ax back and let it go against the beasts' ankle, and the bite was enough for the dragon to roar and let go of Soul for a split second. It was all he needed: Soul brought his tail up and whipped it against the dragons face, digging his enormous claws into its jaw. He reached deeply into the Monstrous Nightmares neck and clawed through to his throat, pulling his hand back with a chunk of flesh, blood erupting from the wound like a fountain. Maka shielded herself against the spray, wiping away blood and watching as Soul backhanded the dragon and sent him flying in the other direction. The Monstrous Nightmare hit the base of the tree hard and did not move again.

Soul shook his great hand and a chunk of the Monstrous Nightmare's neck fell wetly to the ground.

Then Soul slumped over.

"Soul, are you okay? Soul!" Maka ran to him when he fell to his side, his pained groans making bile rise up her throat. "Soul...no, no! Soul, I'm sorry," she whispered, feeling self-loathing burn in her heart. It was her fault, this was her fault. If she had only trusted Soul, if she hadn't hesitated so long because of her dumb thoughts, this would have never happened. He would not have been injured like this. "I'm sorry," she cried into his limp wing and nudged him a little. "C'mon, can you move?" She saw him nod weakly and she guided him to the depth-less caves they had caught sight of while they were in the air. "We have to get to those caves, Soul, so I can treat your wounds... dammit!" She wished she were bigger, stronger, so she could carry him to the caves. Watching him limp heavily by her side, his breaths coming hard and wheezy, his blood dripping a trail, was agonizing for her.

It was all because she had let dumb, dumb thoughts take over mind. They had festered and grown into terrible ideas and mistrust had ingrained itself before she knew it. But it was all useless because Soul had never given her a reason to doubt him and a few unsaid secrets could not undo years and years of trust. She would not let it.

"I'll fix you," Maka hushed against his limp wing. "Like before, I'll fix you, Soul."

The next few hours were grueling and by the time Maka finished patching up Soul, she was covered in blood and sweat and grime and all she wanted was to bathe in the river and forget the last few hours. But she sat right beside his prone form and let her hand softly stroke his cheek while he rested. She often did this, she remembered, before she discovered what he truly was. She liked his affection, the way her dragon would sidle up next to her during cold winter nights and offer her a warmth that exceeded her campfire. When she had gone out with Black Star on missions, the boy would always tell her that she was lucky she had such a protective dragon. Not all dragons were so complacent with their masters. He'd been hinting at Mifune when he said that, who slept by a corner and ignored his Meister completely when nightfall came. Soul liked to curl up with her safely against his belly and she'd felt so, so happy about it. He trusted her so much, so much that he allowed her to sleep against a part of his body that was vulnerable to attack. She'd never taken it for granted, his trust and loyalty to her, until today.

Today she had.

And he had nearly died because of it.

She felt more tears well in her eyes and she sucked back a sob when he breathed out and nudged her back. "This is all my fault," she whispered, hunching even lower. But her eyes lit up fiercely and she pressed her forehead against his snout. "\_I'm sorry I did it in the first place.\_..."

Maka curled herself up against his snout and fell into an uneasy sleep.

Soul opened his eyes when he heard her breath even out and nudged his chin against her gently. His eyes were troubled, but there was resolve in them. He would not let Maka slip away from him like this. They had a lot of talking to do and he would start the instant he was strong enough to transform back into his human self.

\* \* \*

><p>It took four days for Soul to heal enough for him to transform back.</p>

He would have done it earlier, but they had both learned that transforming while he was injured was too much stress for his human body. Often times, he was unable to even if he tried. It was still a mystery as to how transformation worked, if his body beheld a type of magic that protected him against such strain. He had reverted back to his human body while Maka slept soundly against the cave wall, having been up the majority of the night looking through the maps and manuscripts her father had given her. Although most of it came from Stein; he could smell the doctors scent on the papers. Soul had his suspicions about the doctor: there was something deceitful about him, something that made Soul want to stay away. It didn't help that he knew much more than he let off, especially about dragons.

"Soul?"

Soul bit into an apple. "It's frozen," he answered instead, holding the apple for her inspection. His jagged teeth had no problem

shattering the apple in his mouth, but she could see his disgruntlement. "Why'd you leave 'em out again?"

"I forgot to put them back in the pack...sorry," she rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. She looked at the spread of papers before her and began collecting them silently as Soul watched her. After a second, she paused, and her shoulders visibly slumped over. "...Do you feel better now?"

"Yeah. Bleeding stopped," he added, then winced when her shoulders slumped over even more. That had been the wrong thing to say; why did he always say the wrong thing? "I-I mean...it isn't as bad as it looked. The blood makes it look worse!" He cursed when she nodded quietly, having heard her teeth grind. Great, perfect. He was making things even worse! "I'm fine, Maka, stop worrying about me. Are you okay?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. I transformed pretty roughly to catch you. I...might've hurt you."

"I'm fine." It sounded a little bitter.

"Good," he answered. "Kid would kill me if something happened to you."

Maka dropped her eyes to her lap and Soul was left struggling. He did not quite know what was proper and what wasn't yet, especially in unusual circumstances like this one. He thought that if they were in his homeland, he could have done like Wes and directly asked her. But could he? Bluntly ask? The other times he let his tongue get ahead of himself it ended with a painful bump on his head and his Master huffing and puffing a few steps away. But he could sense her discomfort, her disappointment and her hurt, and he wanted to ease it all. A smiling Maka would always, always be better than a sad Maka.

"I'm serious," he added, quietly. "It's fine. We're both alive, aren't we?"

Maka fisted her hands and looked up, green eyes rimmed with tears but fierce. "That's not good enough! You still got hurt, we could have died! This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't hesitated! If I had just trusted you, you wouldn't have..." Her eyes ran over his wounds regretfully but instead of crumbling, she hardened, and she raised fierce green eyes to his wide ones. She reached forward, fell on her knees and gripped his shoulder, holding his gaze with hers as she promised, "I won't ever let that happen again! I'll get stronger so that you don't get hurt ever again!"

He was not usually speechless, but even if he tried to speak, not a word would breach his throat.

Instead, a snorting chuckle escaped his throat, an incredulous laugh that had her flustered, and he took her gentle smack on the head without any complaints.

"You can't stop everything from hurting me. You're human, you know that I can withstand a lot more damage than you, right?"

"That doesn't matter! It's not fair!" Maka argued. She looked down, pensive. "I want to help, too. I wouldn't be able to stand if you got hurt like this again. But if we get stronger..."

"It's my duty as your dragon to protect you," Soul told her, smiling crookedly. Her green eyes were misty; he could smell her tears, but she held them back bravely. His admiration for her grew and he had to look down to hide his pinking cheeks. "I took that oath when you saved me three winters ago."

Maka felt irritation warm her cheeks and she puffed them, getting up in his face. He jerked back, dumbfounded, as she shouted, "Well, you saved my life today, didn't you? We're even then! You saved mine, I saved yours! That means you don't owe me anything!"

"It...doesn't work that way! I was just doing what I promised I'd do: protect you!"

"We both owe each other," Maka ignored him, willing her courage to see her through to the end. "We'll both get stronger, together, like always. We won't let anything hurt each other. Because we owe each other!" She continued, stubbornly, unwilling to let him sacrifice everything for her. Guilt gripped her and her resolution became steel: she would get stronger, she would never doubt him again.

Soul sighed after a while, grinning when she snapped what was so irritating that he had to look at her like that, all exasperated. Fond, he thought to himself, but it was fine if she could not distinguish that yet. "You're really slow, we've always been getting stronger together. That isn't going to change. We just messed up a little today. We'll get better." He took her hand before she could argue, gripped it tight. "Promise," and the next time he met her eyes, they were light and hers were determined, and the promise was sealed when her other hand reached for his empty one, until both their hands were twined between them as the blizzard reigned on outside.

\* \* \*

><p>The winter would be very bitter.</p>

Kid braced himself against a hard gust of wind, closing his eyes against the slate of cold that covered the land in white. He disliked winter for the sole reason that it took so many lives with it; it never spared one, it always took its share. Fortunately, these winters his beloved spent her days in the warmth of his home along with her sister; no more were the days cold and cruel to them. Kid planned to let it stay that way.

"Commander!"

Kid looked ahead and paused his patrol as a hooded figure jogged through the thick snow, pulling his wooly hood back to reveal a head of black. Akane grinned at his commander, a toothpick in his mouth, his cheeks flushed from the cold. Kid narrowed his eyes at the figure that walked steps behind him, her cloak blacker than the night sky. He could see her long hair from where he stood, falling down her shoulders and catching in the wind. He immediately went on alert;

there was something off with the woman. "What brings you so far out of the village, Akane? Weren't you supposed to be stationed with the Keeper?"

"I went to go check gate when I come across this young lady right here," Akane smirked, thumbing behind him. "Seems like she was heading down to the next village and was caught in the storm. I figured it couldn't hurt to bring her to the closest lodge for the night."

"I see," Kid replied, evenly. "Terrible weather to be traveling in. The nearest lodge is straight down from here," he told her. "Akane, to your post. Stein needs a helper."

"Helper?" He groaned, not looking at all pleased with the task. "Well, if you say so." He turned back to the woman, who had yet to pull her hood back. But Kid could just see how her bloody red lips curved up in a bewitching smile. Kid was unaffected; in fact, his distrust grew worse at the secretive smile. Akane scratched the back of his head, smiling, and pulled his hood over his head. "I hope you sleep well tonight, miss. They say today will be the start of one of the coldest winters in a dozen," he waved just as she did, graceful to his clumsy, and Kid flicked his eyes back to her once Akane was out of earshot.

"I bid you good night," Kid told her politely and had been about to round her when she finally spoke:

"Ah...would it be too much of a bother to direct me? I'm quite terrible with directions, you see, the snow...is thickening," she said the last bit slowly, looking up to reveal striking violet eyes. Kid frowned, looking behind him to see the wind was indeed thickening the air with snow. obscuring sight. It would be a heavy night and he did not anticipate waking up to snow all way to his chest again. It was bad enough that Liz always forced him to shovel it out in the morning.

"Sure. This way."

Kid was usually a good judge of character. Liz often said it was his one saving grace, but Kid liked to think he had others. This woman, however, was making the hairs on the back of his neck rise. She always kept a step behind him and he didn't like that. He would not have any problem with it if he didn't feel like she were about to pull a dagger to his spine at any second.

"Here you are. Have a good night," he told her, politely. He had been about to turn when she spoke up, sounding unsure. He would have bought it, had he not caught sight of her sharp eyes before they melted into curiosity. It was a good act, but this only reinforced his distrust of her. A hollow wind blew his furry collar up, his hood threatening to pull over his head. He pulled it without another thought; the gods be with him as the woman asked:

"I hear you take in a lot of runaways," she began. "I was wondering if, perhaps, you have seen a boy with white hair? Young, no older than twenty, perhaps?"

The hood masked his surprised eyes. His voice, however, was even: "We take in a lot of strays, ma'am, with a variety of features. But no

one fits such a description as far as I know. Why? Is he someone you know?" He asked and pushed his hood to the side this time, his golden eyes boring into her own. But she only smiled guilelessly at him, shaking her head:

"Not personally, no. He helped me during one of my travels, once. I am a woman who likes to pay her debts."

"I see. If I see him around, I'll be sure to let you know," Kid responded. His gut churned uneasily. "Good night."

"Yes, thank you. Sleep well." She turned and her long braid of hair followed, a black so thick it challenged the night itself. The hair, however, was what caught his attention the most. Silky, thin, and reflecting the dull colors of its surroundings. It looked strong, resembling more a spiders silk strand than human hair. Kid pulled his hood tighter over him, old rumors and stories whirling in his mind.

He needed to talk to Stein \_now. \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>"<em>You see anything?" Black Star hollered, tugging on her reigns. Tsubaki's eyes slit a little, not in anger or annoyance, but rather to adjust the strap of leather that threatened to close her eye. Black Star had insisted on this complicated web of a harness, stating that since she was so lithe and fast, he needed something that he could hold onto so he wouldn't go flying in the other direction when she made sharp turns. So he had hooked her up with a harness that went around her head and down her body until it met with the saddle.

It took some getting used to, but Black Star was letting her get used to it as they flew over the white land, over thatches of wood and frosted leaves, to the location of Soul's brother.

But first, Black Star wanted to \_try her out\_, which was barbarian-speak for \_let's find a\_ \_rogue dragon and kill it with fire! \_

Tsubaki felt her insides churn and become colder than the ice that coated her scales. But she did not allow any of her fear to show: she had to prove to Black Star, to her righteous king, that she was brave and strong and she had a right to be on this mission!

It was easier thought than done, however.

"There! You see 'em? Red scalesâ€"PERFECT! IT'S A FIRE BREATHER, I BET!"

Tsubaki felt like recoiling back and burying herself in her linguistic books. But she obeyed Black Star's reckless, rigid, command.

"Alright, Tsubaki! Now to show you how to sneak up on a dragon! You ready!?"

She grunted, a soft sound in Black Star's ears. Everything about her was soft, maternal. Black Star could not wait to break that out of

her and make her a force to be reckoned with.

"Alright," he cleared his throat. "FIRST RULE OF A WARRIOR! SILENCE! WE MUST DISSOLVE IN THE DARKNESS AND ERASE OUR BREATHING! WAIT FOR AN OPENING TO ATTACK YOUR TARGET!" He bellowed, grinning so widely she was surprised his face hadn't cracked. She rose a brow; rules of the warriors? This was the first time she had ever heard of such rules.

"SECOND RULE OF THE WARRIOR! ANALYZE THE TARGET IN ORDER TO PREDICT HIS THOUGHTS AND MOVEMENTS!"

Tsubaki slithered through the snow-burdened trees, keeping to the boughs and dark shadows, her eyes trained the dragon who looked around in confusion. Most likely trying to identify the direction her Master's voice was coming from...

"THIRD RULE OF THE WARRIOR!" Black Star dug his heels into her side, pulled on the reigns and guided her up. "TAKE OUT THE TARGET BEFORE THEY NOTICE YOUR PRESENCE! LET'S BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF IT GOOOOOOO!" He roared, reaching behind him for his twin blades. He laughed mockingly as the fire-breathing dragon blinked up at them, startled by their sudden appearance, and Tsubaki wanted to cry out that they had most definitely broken all three rules in some way or another. But she did not have the time: Black Star pressed his foot into her neck and made her dive down. She was rushing at the fire-breather who had sensed their killing intent and snarled, fire coalescing before its mouth.

"RIGHT!"

She did as she was told, shutting her eyes as Black Star slashed his blades into the dragons snout, a great roar of pain making Tsubaki want to dart behind the trees. But she did not have time to consider running: Black Star was a relentless Meister. He guided her without pause and, as Tsubaki crashed into the fire-breather, knocking it off its feet, he used her hard scales to his advantage a little too easily.

"Dive up!" Black Star hollered.

She did and gasped when she did not feel his weight on her back. She wavered in the air, but when she curved back down to catch him, she found that he had jumped off her on purpose. He had landed on the dragons face. Tsubaki watched as Black Star stabbed his blades into the dragon's eyes, slashing horizontally before jabbing the tips of his blades back into the dragons skull with a final, brutal, crunch. The ropes of muscle on his arms bulged with the force and Tsubaki was both awed and horrified by how swiftly Black Star had eliminated the dragon. It had taken him no time at all; he knew where to aim, knew how to subdue it. Yet why had they taken so long...?

Me, Tsubaki realized with a drop of her heart. He was teaching me how he fights, he was...he was teaching me. And she had wanted to run away. Tsubaki bowed her head in shame, but once more Black Star did not allow her to stick to one spot for too long.

"Tsubaki!" He hollered, waving her down. She quickly slithered down towards him, surprised when he leaped onto her back and gripped her reigns without trouble. "That was GREAT!" He laughed. "You did

perfect! I knew you were a natural! This is good, I have less to teach you than I thought I would!" He patted her neck in reward and she felt pride and hope and happiness bubble in her chest. She had done good? She had met his expectations, then?

"Thought you'd be harder to train," he grunted, flicking his wrist of blood. Snow was beginning to blanket the dead fire-breather as Black Star led them away from the scene, sliding his swords back on the sheaths that were strapped to his back. "Since you looked kinda' wimpy. But I was completely wrong!" He sat down crosslegged on her back, she could feel it, and her heart warmed when he rubbed her neck. "Keep over the clouds and straight. I'll tell ya' when to go down soon. I think that's enough training FOR NOW," he added with a loud laugh.

She did as she was told and she promised to herself that would be the only time she would think about running away.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: \*\*Sorry I took such a long time off to update this story. I had a lot to deal with in my personal life, but I am back to updating this story on a monthly basis.

\_Scar. \_

End  
file.